

VOL. 5  
No. 1

THE VIRGIN of VALKARION  
A Barbarian-Worlds Novel by POUL ANDERSON

PLANET  
STORIES

"Strange Adventures  
on Other Worlds"

JULY  
1951

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

# PLANET stories

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"The 39th Dynasty shall fall  
with the Mating of the  
Moons. An Outlander shall  
seize the Queen—" so ran  
the Prophecy

## The VIRGIN of VALKARION

A Barbarian-Worlds Novel

by POUL ANDERSON

The  
TIMELESS ONES  
by FRANK B. LONG



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# PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, NO. 1

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

JULY, 1951

## ► Gripping Novel of Strange Adventure

### THE VIRGIN OF VALKARION . . . . . Poul Anderson 84

Tonight, so spake the Temple Prophecy, a sword-scarred Outlander would come riding, a Queen would play the tavern bawd, and the Thirty-ninth Dynasty should fall with the Mating of the Moons!

## ► Two Exciting Space Novels

### SLAVE-SHIP TO ANDRIGO . . . . . Ross Rocklynne 4

The King: Hawk Stevens, skipper of the slave-ship *Selwyn*. The Pawn: John-boy Single, who had stolen Hawk's woman. The covered Bishop: Corpin the Pious, shrewdly planning mutiny. With a rum-belly space-rat crew, they blasted off to strip far Andrigo of its gentle people . . .

### VENUS MISSION . . . . . J. T. M'Intosh 36

You are struggling through the weird, mist-shrouded jungles of Venus . . . ahead of you, too far, lie the warmly glowing lights of City Four . . . behind you, too close, silently stalks the most terrible Death In the System!

## ► Six Short Stories

### SIGN OF LIFE . . . . . Dave Dryfoos 23

The death-winds of Venus screamed with glee as George Main lay dying. Then the winds brought strange shapes to haunt him—and a stranger hope . . .

### MONSTER . . . . . William Morrison 27

Colonizing Mars was hell, because of one thing—large, hungry critters. They flew, crawled, snarled, howled, burrowed up under the floors, chewed at doors and windows. And then, to make things worse, came the Monster . . .

### THE TIMELESS ONES . . . . . Frank Belknap Long 49

It was a peaceful world, a green world, where bright blossoms swayed beneath two golden suns. Why did the visitors from Earth sit in their rocketship—terrified?

### TEMPLE OF HAN . . . . . Jack Vance 56

To steal the shimmering Eye of Han—that was no trick for the wily Terran. To hand back the great green jewel, to give his body to priestly torture—that was asking much of a space-rogue.

### MERCY FLIGHT . . . . . Mack Reynolds 66

It was a lesson you learned in the Space-Forces, and you learned it good: Out in the lonely void, when you get in a jam, you're on your own . . . It's you against everything and everybody. Anything goes . . .

### BLACKOUT IN CYGNI . . . . . James Blish 73

As madness stalked the sub-space liner *Telemachus*, First Mate Dirk Phillips knew that the impossible was happening—piracy along the Long Arc!

On Sale May-June

I. T. SCOTT, President

JEROME BIXBY, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, General Manager

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# THE VIZIGRAPH

Having misplaced our Silly Putty, we are in a sullen, uncharitable mood and shall proceed to say almost nothing:

Next issue's cover—and the story it (Rothstein, are you there?) illustrates—will knock your eyes right out of your head. Author: Theodore Sturgeon.

Pic-winners are 1) Joe Gibson (yuk); 2) Ken Beale; 3) Dennis Strong.

Good reading, all—and see you July 1st.

—J.B.

## ANTI-CULT CULT

34 Parkman St.  
Dorchester 22, Mass.

MR. BIXBY:

Dennis Strong (see VIZIGRAPH March 1951) is undoubtedly a remarkable man. He is so remarkable that I find it almost unbelievable that he can be so upset by the moronic mouthings of so inconsequential a lot of unjailed juvenile delinquents.

Every semi-sober reader of SF has, at some time or another, been mildly irritated by the BEM school of letter-writing; but few of us have flipped our wigs in so undignified a fashion as Mr. Strong has.

Mr. Strong is, however, a brilliant character and analyst. Any man who can deduce the cultural, educational and intellectual levels of the several members of a geographically disparate group of letter writers is at least a crystal-gazer and at best a genius—in either case a potentially useful citizen.

Mr. Strong considers these "parasitical dilettantes" equivalent to a hole in the head of the body SF. He says they have nothing to give to SF. What does Mr. Strong have to give? What have I to give? We all give the same thing: our support.

It is true that the lunatic fringe is always with us. Those of us with variegated interests are familiar with more types of cliques, but they are all, somehow, the same: a source of embarrassment to the True Believer. Perhaps Mr. Strong and I are members of the same coterie, the anti-cult cult.

One thing which the childswarm has given to SF is the phenomenon called the fanzine. I don't know much about fanzines, but they represent a rare tribute to the writers of SF.

When Mr. Strong has time I wish he would brief me on literary form, especially the novel. And, Mr. Strong, next time you see an asterisk, and exclamation-point riddled letter in the VIZIGRAPH, sniff twice and ignore it for the sake of your hypertension.

Sincerely,  
JAMES A. BURGESS



## FANS ARE HUMAN?

4 Spring Street  
Lubec, Maine

DEAR JERRY,

May I have a page or two to discuss the letter of Dennis Strong which appeared in the March 1951 issue of *PLANET*? Thanks.

Every once in a while one of these high and mighty characters turns up to show us how superior and intelligent he is, all the while maligning everyone else. This puzzles me. Why should any person start discussing in such a manner something he knows little or nothing about? Unless it be for the above mentioned reasons.

This Strong character (no pun intended) seems to lack an understanding of the basic workings of the average American. In any group of people interested in the same specialized form of work, entertainment, etc., there is bound to be a dialectic deviation from the King's English. It is to be found everywhere, such as among amateur radio operators, the armed services, musicians, lumbermen, and so on. Why not among s-f devotees also? Then, humor is one of the basic characteristics of our people, or of any human. Fans, being like any other human, have a sense of humor and use it. And being sort of clannish, as would be "hams," it is often understood only by them because of the fiction they read. Imaginative fiction and imaginative minds combine to make such a thing as Ken Beale's "worples" and its use funny only to fans. And what's wrong with that?

Of course, anything can be overdone. This humor sometimes is, but there has been a noticeable cut-down both on the part of the letter-writers and the editor's request. Then we have your "cultist leanings . . ." Is this supposed to refer to Dianetics yet?

Then there is the matter of commenting on the stories and artwork. In the first place, Mr. Strong, it is a basis of Democracy that one man can comment freely about any subject he desires as long as he doesn't violate the other man's rights. Fans happen to make use of this right. Especially since it is the policy of most s-f publications to request such comments for publication and consideration. Most readers have read stf for many years and can't help but gain some little knowledge of the writing of science-fiction. Not being trained critics, we can't always write flawlessly accurate criticisms of each story, but in most cases the writer usually knows whereof he writes. Authors sometimes request such opinions privately from fans. So it can't all be devil!

Here and there you make direct reference to names. Sometimes this could be actionable. However, this is merely a case of self-centered ignorance. It so happens that you, Mr. Strong, don't know Rick Sneary and why his letters appear as they do. I must say that he makes a lot more sense than you do when he writes a letter. You don't know Redd Boggs and all the others. You merely know how to write insults founded on your own ignorance of other human beings. This certainly strikes me as being a case of sour grapes at least. And, of course, only you understand Ray Bradbury's writings.

A peak of ignorance on your part is the impolite way you refer to the name of Isaac Asimov. Every man has the right to respect for his name and it is only reasonable in polite society

for a man to wish that his name be spelled correctly. It is therefore very poor form and also betrays little intelligence on your part to author that last paragraph. It reminds me of a punished child's attitude after his censoring parent has left him standing in the corner.

This is about all I care to stomach of Mr. Strong's letter. I am sure others will cover it more thoroughly than I and probably more competently.

I'd like to make a comment or two on the magazine itself before I close, so, if you will . . .

The last few issues have maintained the par for enjoyability, and I have noted and welcomed the many additions and improvements. Longer stories such as Craig's *WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS* and la Brackett's *BLACK AMAZON OF MARS* hold to the line of competent space-adventure to be found in each issue of PS. At least I liked them. Shorter stories such as Lang's *GUEST EXPERT*, Anderson's *DUEL ON SYRTIS* and Oberfield's *POISON PLANET* exemplify the growing quality of the short stories. Addition of such authors as Horace Fyfe and van Vogt are notable and welcome. I also applaud the addition of Paul Orban to your art staff. His drawing for van Vogt's story in the March issue showed more pep than a lot of his work has in a long time. Cartier also welcome. The reprint was not, though. The story was good but the idea of reprints isn't. The revival of the Feature Flash also welcome. Nothing like reading the author's own words about himself. Shows what human and regular guys they are. Everybody, pro or fan, that I've ever met always made that impression on me.

Lastly, give the awards to Ken Beale, Joe Gibson and Stanley Nathanson for best letters (or at least they appealed to me in that order). Dennis Strong should get some sort of bravery award I suppose. Well, Jerry, I didn't burn the midnight oil but I bet this comes close to deadline time.

Yours sincerely,

Ed Cox

## DUCK . . . A VOTE'S COMING!

224 Broad Street,  
Newark, Ohio

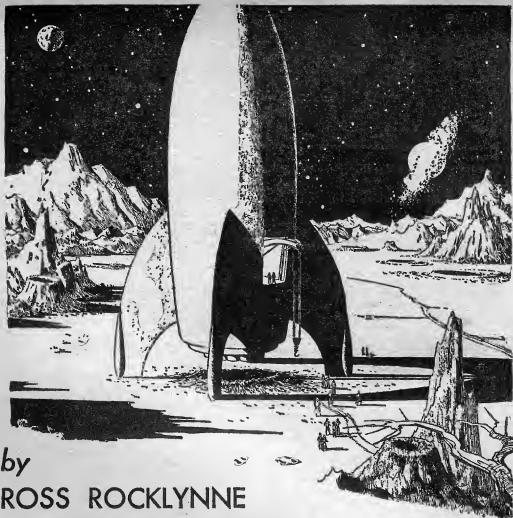
DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Whether you know it or not, I owe you a letter. *PLANET* was the first science-fiction magazine I ever read, and I want to congratulate you, first, on the vast improvement over that Spring, 1949 issue which introduced me to stf. I've seen arrays of name authors on cover pages before and been disappointed by the stories, but your men really came through.

I liked Anderson's *STAR SHIP* a few issues ago, but *DUEL ON SYRTIS* topped it. We'll see more of him, I hope? I can't say anything about reprints that hasn't already been said, especially since you printed such an excellent one. But mark me down as "against" when the votes come in (by guided missile, no doubt, with proximity fuse attached).

It's a funny thing about Raymond Gallun's stories. Since they deal with ordinary people and their reaction to abnormal, or normal future, if you prefer, stimuli, they are the exception to the usual run of emperors, scientists, and galaxy-

(Continued on p. 65)



by

ROSS ROCKLYNNE

## slave ship to ANDRIGO

**A**S USUAL, HAWK STEVENS was in a foul mood. The fact that Johnny Single, his old school buddy from Decimal Point and the man who had crossed him five years ago and married Madge, had just come aboard ship to see him, didn't improve the mood. He arose from the cot where he was sprawled, studied himself in a fly-specked mirror as he rubbed slowly at a two-days' growth of beard. Yeah, that's you, Hawk Stevens. Owner and captain of a stinking four-jet rotor ship. Cutthroat boss of a crew of

*The King: Hawk Stevens, skipper of the slave-ship Selwyn. The Pawn: John-boy Single, who had stolen Hawk's woman. The covered Bishop: Corpin the Pious, shrewdly planning mutiny. With a rum-belly space-rat crew, they blasted off to strip far Andrigo of its gentle people . . .*



He rammed in the starter and the planetruck leaped ahead . . . but Johnny Single was aboard!

cutthroats. Madge should see you now—*slaver.*

He shrugged a derelict blue officer's coat over ox-like shoulders, brushed back inky hair that curled disreputably about his ears and touched at his backbone. All in all, he had a bickford look; curved short nose, savage lips and tufted inky brows shadowing small deep eyes of indeterminate color.

When Johnny Single came in a moment later, Hawk thought with cynical satisfaction, "Slave-bait!" The thought had an overtone that was crueller than usual; Hawk felt a bitter resentment at Single's seeing him as he was, not as he had been, an object of hero-worship. But when he held out his hand, Johnny Single's naive expression was one of brightening pleasure.

"You remembered me, Quinn. After all these years."

"John-boy, I don't forget my good friends."

"If you can still consider me your friend," said Single wryly, "after the ruckus five years ago."

A stab went through Hawk. "Don't mention that, John-boy."

"But I want to mention it, Quinn. Madge—"

"I said forget it!" Hawk snapped.

Single met his glare quietly. Five years before, Single would have quailed before that tone and those words. But those days were over. Johnny Single had grown up. Changed, maybe still in awe of Quinn, who was Hawk now, but still unwilling to be kicked around by a bigger guy.

Hawk went on in the peremptory tones. "And forget that Quinn stuff. It's Hawk, now—Hawk Stevens, bird of prey, with his bloody talons outstretched."

"I don't believe that, Hawk," said Single quietly.

"You'll believe it, Johnny. It isn't like it was when we were both at the space academy—at Decimal Point. About the worst sin you saw me commit then was cribbing from your exams."

Johnny smiled. "Or threatening to knock hell out of me if I didn't write your term papers."

For a moment they stood lost in those

thoughts; then Hawk moved heavily behind his desk, where the cruel, harsh lines of dissipation were smoothed out by the relative shadows cast by the barrier of brilliance from his desk lamp.

"So what can I do for you, Single?" Hawk was cold, distant; Single instantly realized the change of status he had undergone. Hawk added deliberately, "Looking for a job, aren't you?"

Single started. "How'd you know?"

"You can always tell," Hawk said cryptically.

Yeah, you could always tell that look, if it was in some barfly at Pluto's Universal Joint, or in a vice-president given a pratfall by some ambitious, double-crossing subordinate.

SINGLE RELAXED, slowly drew out a cigarette, offered Hawk one. "Okay—Hawk. I'm looking for a job. When I graduated I took the easy way out instead of getting into astrogation like you did. I worked at an engineering job in my father's company, Asteroid Steel. It got caught in the Panic. I've been knocking around from one thing to another for six months. I've found out one thing—that you have to start down low to work up to the astro-marine fleet."

Hawk winced in spite of himself; unintentional or not, the shot told. "So that's the reason you came to me, to start down low?"

"That's one of the reasons. Forget the other for the time being."

Hawk's broad hands were pressing hard on the desk. He hated the moment Johnny Single had come back into his life again, with all its subtle connotations. He hated Johnny Single—or he hated himself, he wasn't sure which.

He said harshly, "I can give you a job, Single. It won't be what you expect, but it's a job, and you can knock around the ship a bit during the trip. I'll hire you as emissary, Single—an emissary to the Greenies."

Single's mouth opened in bewilderment.

Hawk said, "Take it or leave it!"

"Oh, I'll take it, of course," Single said hurriedly. "But how about explaining my duties?"

Hawk made a show of being pressed for time by studying his wrist chronometer.

"We're hitting heaven in less than an hour," he told Single. "I'm going to be busy every blasted minute getting my insubordinate crew to tuning up the stinking rotors. I'm going to assign you to a cabin, if you think you can get your things here in time. This time tomorrow come and see me and I'll give you the low-down. Fair enough?"

Single was stubbornly loath to be dismissed so abruptly. "You might tell me who the Greenies are, at least," he objected.

Hawk said, "The Greenies are a race of plant-people inhabiting the planet Andrigo. Used to be a civilized race—millions of 'em. In the last thousand years, climatic change has played hell with their culture. At present they're in danger of dying off. Well, Single, we're headed for Andrigo. Purpose, to save a few hundred Greenie lives. Satisfied?"

"Well—" said Single. Then he gave up, said wearily, "Okay, Hawk, save it till later—and I'll take the job."

"Another thing," Hawk called after him as he reached the door. "Don't mix with the crew unless you can give it back to them double. They've got a natural aversion to Decimal Pointers, me included."

Single went out, and Hawk said, "Hook-ed!"

Actually, Hawk didn't have any immediate chores except to relay orders to the blasted steward of this junk-heap to quarter Single. But the main factor in hiring so-called "emissaries," or "slave-bait," was to get them to accept the job without really knowing what it was all about. Once they were out in space on the way to Andrigo, Single wouldn't dare to question the standard lie too much—merely as a matter of saving his own self-respect.

Of course, sooner or later, he would learn that Hawk was using him again, this time to trap Greenies so Hawk and his men could transport them back to the slave-market on Eros. He'd probably flip his lid. But all the emissaries got a bit hard to handle then.

And after all, Single was the man who had double-crossed him and married

Madge. When exposure came, Hawk's conscience naturally wouldn't bother him. Naturally not.

HAWK AWOKE, sputtering, as fission-engineer Corpin's voice came through the audio. "All right, stow it," Hawk growled, staggering to the instrument.

Corpin, in the same monotonous voice, informed Hawk that the crew was standing by to cut in the A-motors, the course was set by the stars, traffic was cleared from the skies above the port, and the rotors were heating for eccentric gear.

"I'll take it," growled Hawk. "Stand by."

While he was relaying orders into the proper channels, Corpin spoke again, his voice changed to an unctuous drawl that rolled out of his fat throat:

"I understand you're using one of your friends as slave-bait this time."

Both Hawk's fists crashed down on the board.

As if unaware of this reaction, Corpin continued blandly, "I met Single. A very decent, God-fearing lad, if I'm any judge." Now his tone was a lugubrious, long-suffering down-beat. "Just between you and I, Hawk," he mourned, "I hope he heps to this ratty game before he loses God, like the rest of us. And there's an awful lot of God out in space where He lives."

A curious blend of panic and fury burgeoned in Hawk. Throwing caution to the winds, he ignored frantic signal lights.

He snarled, "And there's a lot of God in the brig, too, Corpin, if you feel like communing. . . . Talk, Corpin, talk! That's all you're good for, talk. Listen! You can't run slaves to the market and try to square yourself with God at the same time."

"You can try," said Corpin "The Pious," as he was known to some. He added mournfully, "You might even succeed."

There was an uplift to the last word that betrayed he was secretly delighted Hawk had let himself be goaded into an argument.

The winking signal lights caught Hawk's eyes at last. Savagely he completed the

set of relays. The fission motors charged into life, created instantaneously hundreds of cubic feet of hot, ionically lighted krypton gas which flared from the jets. The ship was awash with unbearable vibration and sound. Then came the overpowering odor of fission-krypton leaking from hopelessly pitted fission chambers. On the heavy-handed push of the rockets, the *S. Selwyn* moved sluggishly into the sky.

Hawk leaned low to the audio. He was perfectly aware that Corpin had been baiting him.

"Keep your fat slimy face out of my way, hereafter, Corpin. I'm sick of that pseudo-religious mush, and I'll pick any blasted emissary I choose. Furthermore, you might as well know I'm perfectly aware you've been trying to arrange a mutiny among the men so you could take over the *Selwyn*. A barrelful of the men you've approached are loyal to me. Any more conspiring and you'll wind up in the brig. Think it over."

Before he could jam over the cut-off, Corpin the Pious said remorselessly, worriedly, "I don't know, Hawk, I don't know. I figure you for one of those persecution complexes."

His oily voice became confidential. "Between you and I, Hawk, I've jammed the crew full of God's love. They're fond of you, Hawk, very fond. . . ."

**JOHNNY SINGLE AWOKE,** went sleepily to the port. Space. Stars. Emptiness. Nervous as a witch, he dressed. What a fool he'd been to ship out without having the slightest idea what his job was. Anxiety showing in his blue, rather ingenuous eyes, he left the cabin, but instead of going to Hawk's cabin he summoned his nerve and went on an inspection tour of the lower deck. He padded quietly past the bank of ten-ton rotors whose eccentrically geared action now superceded the gas-thrust, was hurling the egg-shaped craft broadside on its course by a curious subversion of Newton's laws of motion.

"Hello, emissary," said a polite voice. Single turned to look into a compartment where a group of three men were grinning at him. Single felt a bristling of that antagonism Cro-Magnon must have felt for

Neanderthal. These were hairy ape-men in filthy clothing, stained with red grease acquired from the machine they were overhauling.

The one who had spoken showed a bank of decayed teeth. "We was talking about how happy we were to have a emissary aboard at last. You know, we hung around Port a week before you come along. Hard to get emissaries; you have to be pure in heart, you know."

They grinned.

The nervous fear in Single increased. He summoned what boldness he could. "What is an emissary?" he demanded.

The men tittered. "Hear that?" said one, nudging the other. "The very fact that he don't know makes him a real emissary. Well," he addressed Single, "are you pure in heart? Are you full of love? Of charity? Are you meek and ready to inherit the planet Andriago? Answer aye and you're an emissary. The Greenies will love you like we do."

Single faced them uncertainly, then was about to go on when two of the men rose with a gliding motion. One on either side, they grabbed him by the biceps. The men stank of fission-krypton. They felt his muscles.

"See?" one chuckled. "He's got muscles like cheese. That means he's led a pure, sheltered life."

Single lurched against them in sudden, blind fury. Whereupon one of the men released him, yelled with supreme indignation, "Who you tryin' to slug?" and knocked him clear across the corridor with a blow to the jaw. Single hung on the bulkhead groggily, but his fury was undimmed. He staggered toward the blurred shapes of his tormenters.

"Here, here, man, what's going on?" said a voice, and a hearty hand wrapped itself around Single's upper arm. "Oh, for the love of God," said fission-engineer Corpin, "there's blood on your jaw."

"These men attacked me," said Single thickly. He tried to lash out at the man who was coming at him, but Corpin was holding his arm. He got it on the jaw again and went down.

"Let me go, sir," he begged, when Corpin hauled him erect. "I'll settle this thing.



"Please let go my arm."

"We are all men of firm religious belief," said Corpin firmly. "There will be no striking of brother against brother."

Single saw the third blow coming, and about the only thing he could do was duck it. It caught him glancingly, and he dropped to all fours, and stayed there panting while rosy mists drifted across his brain. After awhile, Corpin wrapped his fat arms around him at the waist, attempting to lift him.

"No, sir," said Single. "I'll stay down here."

"I did my best for you, boy," said Corpin in the most abject regret.

"I'm sure you did, sir," said Single, gasping as he came erect and staggered down the corridor. He finally brushed Corpin off. Corpin stood looking after him, and then suddenly called, "I'm sorry, boy!"

The three crewmen grinned at Corpin when he turned.

"Thanks for settin' him up for us, Cap'n."

"I was trying to save the poor lad from himself," said Corpin piously. "Mind you, though, no more of that. After all, we do need emissaries in the slave-trade, though time was when we could dose the Greenies with a load of indele-acetic acid without a murmur." He sighed nostalgically. "And no more of that calling me Captain until the fact is assured."

He walked off down the corridor, however, with the lordly manner of a man who already owned the walls around him—he, that is, and God. He ascended through three decks, laboring under the burden his fat bestowed on him, and entered his cabin. As was his wont, he went first to the port, solemnly studying the savannas of endless space. Tears filled his eye.

"Lord, Lord," he said, "in Thy eyes I stand a sinner."

He sat at his desk and, heaving a sigh, drew a bottle from a lower drawer. As he poured, he thought of Johnny Single. Such a decent lad; perfect for an emissary.

**H**AWK'S DEEP EYES hardly changed expression when Single stood before him, blood caking his jaw, clotting his

white linen shirt. "Well," he said harshly, "I told you not to mix with the crew."

"Who mixed with them?" Single demanded. "Even at that, I could have given it right back to them, but Mr. Corpin tried to stop it, and kept getting in my way."

At this, Hawk's laugh barked out. He didn't explain to Single that Corpin, besides being a religious hypocrite, had sadistic tendencies; that much should have been obvious to anybody but—an emissary-type. Single was certainly that.

Single sat down heavily. "Anyway, Quinn, loosen up. Those fellows made some awfully funny cracks about emissaries and the pure in heart."

"Because that's what you are, John-boy. Pure in heart."

"Now you're calling me John-boy again," said Single oddly.

Hawk casually brought his legs up to rest on a corner of the desk so that his head tipped back out of the circle of light. Blasted fool, he told himself. He said blandly, "Well, you're my friend, aren't you, John-boy?"

"Even though I married Madge?"

Hawk's feet came down, the metallic heel-plates ringing against the legs of the chair. He half-rose, face flat and dark, his great fist extended toward Single. Then he withdrew the fist as if by conscious effort and crumpled back in the chair. On his face appeared a small, bitter smile.

"Good self-control, Hawk," Single said, eyeing him steadily. "Madge would like that—to know you've changed that much."

"What difference would it make?" said Hawk in a muffled tone. "Don't bother mentioning her again—or ever. . . . You want to know about the job I hired you for, Single." He could tell Single any lie now; he felt justified in it. "I've helled around the System for a good many years, but this was the first time the Society ever approached me for a mercy run to the Greenies. Lord, I could have made ten times as much profit running a cargo of iridium to Marsport."

He fell to brooding, long enough for Single to get his cue.

"Mercy run?" said Single curiously. "What Society?"

"SUFROM," Hawk rattled off. "So-

ciety For The Relief of Minorities. You've heard of it; one of the boys back at Decimal Point wrote a monograph on it. Some sort of stinking woman's club organized it. Understand," he jabbed a finger at Single, "I'm not the kind that goes for handing out charity, but the Greenies are different."

"Mercy run," mused Single, as if the idea was beginning to hit him but still had a lot of puzzling aspects.

"Oh, I'm not taking any credit for a good act," declaimed Hawk, pacing the floor with gestures. Out of the corner of his eye he noted Single's growing interest, and, more important, an unmistakable touch of the awe Single had held for him when they were at Decimal Point. A devil of delight came to Hawk.

"Oh, I won't claim it was out of any humanitarian impulse, John-boy," he went on. "Say I'm getting paid for it, and let it go at that."

"But you're not getting paid as much for it as for some other run," said Single intently.

"Well—no. Anyway—"

**M**OST OF THE STORY was the straight goods, at that. Hawk told it well. After all, a man could put himself in the shoes of the Greenies if he had any kind of heart. They inhabited the planet Andrigio, so far above the plane of the ecliptic, although near the Sun, that it was out of the regular trade-routes. Plant-people, they were, but superficially humanoid; an old race—maybe too old—sedentary like all plants, even though they did have limbs. But something had happened in the evolution chain. They were dying off. Not only was the planet progressing slowly outward from the Sun, over the centuries, but one of those unpredictable climatic changes had come over the planet in the last thousand years. From a teeming civilization that covered the planet, they had dropped to a population comprised of scattered, isolated villages.

Hawk carefully excluded the information that much of the population decline during the last twenty years was more or less directly attributable to the outlawed slave-trade. That was strictly a hush-hush

matter, inasmuch as the high-pressure boys, millionaires and politicians, bought Greenies at high prices and used them as gardeners on their lush planetary estates; being plants themselves, Greenies had a remarkable feeling for other growing things of the plant class. In an unseasonably short time, most enslaved Greenies died from adverse climatic and soil conditions; but you could always replace them if you knew the right people. And had money.

"I told you the Greenies were still dying off," Hawk said with all the earnestness at his command. "Botanists have laid the blame to a lack of auxins. Plant hormones control every factor of growth, size and longevity, same as animal hormones do in animals. John-boy, the main trouble is that before the Greenies reach the seeding stage of growth, their roots have all but stopped growing. They die before they can reproduce. That's where I come in. My cargo this trip is a few dozen hogsheds of indele-acetic acid, the plant-hormone which stimulates root-growth."

Single was hanging attentively on every word. He smiled sheepishly. "You had me fooled, Hawk. When I saw you yesterday I thought sure you were pretty far gone in the ways of sin."

"I've done some pretty stinking things." Hawk's broad shoulders squirmed with embarrassment. "But once in awhile, a man realizes he has to live with himself, John-boy. In fact, that's exactly the reason I had to hire you as emissary." He squirmed again. His face was actually red and flushed; sweat was pendant on his forehead. He was finding it harder to go on with the blasted lie; if only John-boy didn't have the dewy shine of an idealist in his eyes! The same blasted hero-worship he'd had for Hawk at Decimal Point.

Hawk had to wrench his eyes away. "It's just that you're pure in heart, John-boy. We're not. We're rotten to the core, every one of us, and the Greenies can sense that. The minute they saw me or anybody else on this ship—they'd scatter like jack-rabbits and never come back to their village even if we soaked the ground in indele-acetic."

Single's thoughtful comprehension was

manifest on his face. Hawk momentarily closed his hot eyes. The blasted lie was over. It had been an ordeal, sure as hell.

AFTER THREE DAYS, twenty hours plus in space, the *S. S. Selwyn* fluffed to a spectacular landing on Andrigo, coming straight down from the Sun so the Greenies wouldn't be able to spot her in that tremendous glare. The horribly twisted plants and withered trees of that pitiless desert bent and were demolished as the ship furrowed through the sand. Instantly, all was an orderly confusion, as the amidships gangway was let down, and the broad-tired planetruck, with a truck-bed as big as the floor of a large house, was yo-heave-hoed rolling from the ship. Then the astromen went fast at the work of loading her with hogshead after hogshead of indele-acetic acid.

Johnny Single stood watching. The proceedings were perfectly plain to him now. Corpin waddled up to him, all broad smiles and happiness, wearing a broad frigo-hat.

"Good luck, Single," he said warmly, wringing Single's hand. "You understand how it is. We're spacemen. Rough. Profane. Really outlaws of the worse sort. Being what they are, the Greenies can spot it in a minute. A sort of sixth sense. Not that they can read your mind. But they'll see that you're pure in heart and will accept the gift."

"I understand, sir," said Single, uneasily trying to draw away from the sweaty grip.

Corpin pointed into the distant rising sand-dunes. "Oasis over there about ten miles; time was—" he swept the territory with his short arm—"when all this was a lovely green. Now it's all changed. Who," he said piously, "can fathom the way of God's mind? Not us mortals. Ah, well." He sighed. He fixed Single with cow-like eyes.

"I wish I was young again, son. I'd travel in the ways of God."

"Why don't you, anyway, sir?" said Single politely.

"I try, I try in my small way," Corpin said complacently. "But we are all, between you and I, victims of human failings." Then his gaze wandered back to Single, a trifle sharply. "You didn't mean anything

by that remark, did you, son?" His grasp on Single's arm tightened.

"Why, what remark, sir?" Single tried to get loose. Off to one side he saw some of the crewmen grinning at him as they worked.

"That remark you made," said Corpin, drawing him closer until his eyes, now curiously molten, were a few inches away. "That I should move in the ways of God. You didn't overhear anything, did you, son? You aren't thinking of crossing me, are you, son?"

"I don't know what the hell you mean!" Single wrenched free.

Corpin stood back. "All right, son, I believe you. I want to tell you something. If you and Hawk ever have a blow-off, come to me. I'm your friend." Heavily he plodded away, adjusting his frigo-hat against the Sun. Hawk came in from another direction, strutting.

"What was he doing, getting at you?" he demanded. He muttered something profane when Single told him. Then he slung his arm around Single. "Don't worry, John-boy," he said heartily, "you and I'll never have a blow-off."

"Yeah," Single said wryly. "That's the way you used to talk to me when you tried to get around me to do your papers. You always did have a way."

Hawk felt a stab of alarm, but apparently Single was only making talk, for he was looking off absently at the now loaded truck.

"I guess," Hawk said, "you'd better be on your way."

Single drove off without a backward look, the heavily scored treads of the planetruck kicking up clouds of dusty sand. In the shallow gravity the truck rode easily, bound for the oasis where lived the tribe of Greenies.

Single was, all in all, gloomy about his mission. He was scared stiff Hawk might be using him again. Stubbornly he rejected the notion. He was committed to this course, and had better sponge his mind of doubt, seeing that the Greenies, without benefit of communication through regular channels, were strangely gifted in an ability to sense disharmony.

He relaxed at the wheel.

HAWK, CORPIN and several other men stood atop the space-ship, staring tensely at the Greenies' village through electronically amplified binoculars.

Hawk's dark face was grim with satisfaction. "It's working," he said out loud to the men grouped on the desert floor. "The Greenies are swarming around the truck. They haven't run for it yet anyway."

"They're hooked, God rest their betrayed souls," said Corpin, letting his eyes fill with tears.

The distant scene assumed the terrible proportions of out-size drama. The village concourse swarmed as the Greenies were drawn toward the fatal hormone. At first, there was a sense of orderliness, as the hogsheads were bunged, containers brought; then the drinking commenced, orderly too at first. Then the action shifted to a blurred vista of green shapes, insensibly imbibing.

Hawk got a fix on Single. He was sickened and disgusted—that much was plain on his drawn face. Plainly he was looking for a chance to back the truck away.

"God," said Corpin, staying with his obsession, "works in strange ways, Hawk. You wouldn't think He'd make Greenies this stupid, the poor souls, if they have souls."

"God," said Hawk, voice edged with mimicry, "made plants to open wide their leaves when it rained. Well, it's raining."

An hour later, Hawk figured the stage was set in the distant village. The men loaded into the other planetruck, testing the sharpness of their knives. On the way to the village, the planetruck driven by Single came roaring from the opposite direction. The trucks came to a stop abreast each other and Single came jumping out of the cab.

"What's up?" he called, catching Hawk's eye.

Hawk didn't answer the question. He said, "What's the idea bringing that planetruck back? We'll need it." He motioned one of his men, who took over the wheel of Single's truck, backed it around and set its blunt snout pointing toward the village again.

Single looked baffled.

"Have any trouble?" Hawk called genially. But his eyes were cold, unfriendly slits.

"Not much," said Single. "Naturally they trusted me." He grabbed Hawk's ankle where Hawk sat in the cab of the planetruck at the wheel. His eyes were full of dumb misery. "Listen, Quinn. What's the idea? You don't want to go into that village when they're—when they're—well, I was surprised, the way it affected them. Auxins may be what they need—they actually grew roots while I watched; but it makes them—drunk. They're blinko."

"Yah, emissary," grinned one of the men, leaning over the railing.

"Tell me what's going on, Hawk," Single said quietly. He started climbing to the fender, but one of the men shoved him off.

Hawk said, "No rough stuff." Then he brought deliberately cruel eyes back to Single. At the acute misery which started back at him, he experienced a wrench of pure, unexpected pain. "Well," he shouted full into Single's face, "did you expect me to tell a sap like you the truth? We're slavers, John-boy, *slavers!* What else?" He rammed in the starter and the planetruck leaped ahead. But Johnny Single was aboard. One terrific leap of fury had taken him into the cab, both arms around Hawk's neck. In a threshing heap, Hawk and Single tumbled from the leaping truck, fell just free of the grinding wheels. Hawk felt himself curiously immobile, as if robbed of the will to defend himself. He let himself be hauled to his feet, allowed Single's oncoming fist to connect with his jaw. His brain seemed to burst. Fancy the kid having a punch like that. He went down.

Single stood over him while the truck stopped a hundred feet away, disgorging men who came running excitedly back. Single shouted down at Hawk in uncontrollable, almost incoherent rage. "That's it, lie there. Let me kick you. But it isn't going to be that easy, thinking you can save your conscience by letting me beat you up."

He hauled the unresisting Hawk erect, smashed him back down again. Hawk lay

flat, bleeding at the mouth, while he watched the wild tears coursing from Single's eyes.

"I told you I came to you for a job, Quinn," Single choked. "I did, but there was another reason. Madge, Madge, Madge! MADGE! She wanted you back, Hawk Stevens! She sent me to see if you were changed, if that spark of decency you used to have had grown to make you somebody worthwhile. She still loves you, Quinn. She didn't want me, I just happened to be there when she had to get rid of you. Yeah! And you still love her, I can see it in your slimy eyes. Well, now I've got plenty to tell her, Quinn! I'll tell her what a degenerate you've turned into. I'll tell her there's nothing left—"

Hawk stood up and felled him with a blow.

"Get back in the trucks," he ordered the men. "Get at it. We've wasted enough time."

AT THE VILLAGE, the majority of the Greenies were already in their torpor, fastened by swift-growing roots to the earthen floors of their huts. They sat there, like green dwarfs, with delicate, fleshy appearing roots growing out of their arm, leg and shoulder joints. Some of the younger Greenies cavorted about the body of men, screaming threats, but there weren't enough of them to put up any resistance. Soon knives were flashing. The spacers were old hands at this game, in record time cut the Greenies free from their restraining roots, loaded them eight deep in the trucks. When the village was cleaned out, Hawk gave a deliberate coarse laugh.

*Johnny Single was right. There's nothing left, a still dead voice agreed. You've lost Madge—and you could have had her. Well, lose her good. Be a worse rat even than John-boy thinks you are.*

Some distance away, Corpin the Pious watched Hawk with mild interest. He nudged the spacer standing next to him.

"He's beginning to break up; it's tellin' on him. The last time we cut the Greenies—which was the first time for him—I figured he was sick to his stomach. Now he's got this Madge to plague him; every

strong man has his Delilah."

"Maybe we better—"

"Cautiously, cautiously," Corpin waved the spacer quiet. "Hawk's still got a few men on his side—let him have plenty of time to turn even them against him. I've been waiting for some situation like this."

The Greenies had been locked in the soil-cells, and in his cabin Hawk lay on his cot in the darkness, seemingly quiescent. But agonized fire burned in his brain. Sickening lurches of memory carried him down to the past. Hawk hadn't been much the gentleman with Madge; mistakenly, he'd believed her to have his own wild nature. But beneath the bubble and froth of her personality was a quiet surface. The third time his escapades made her break off with him, he had laughed it off, skipped half a semester, gone on a hell-bending trip. When he got back, Single had crossed him and the wedding date was set. Hawk didn't stay around for the wedding, but, as soon as he was graduated, got out of there. He'd been running away ever since. And all he'd ever accomplished by those years of trying to forget was to make himself realize that he achingly loved Madge.

Hawk tossed on the cot. *Damn the day John-boy set foot on this ship.* He roused when Corpin called for take-off orders. Hawk went woodenly through his paces. Then:

"You're sure Single's aboard?" he asked abruptly.

"I saw him," Corpin's voice came. "He's all shot to pieces, Hawk."

"All right, forget it."

"Sounded like his faith in human nature was shot," Corpin persisted, an unmistakably sly note in his voice.

"I told you to forget it, didn't I?" Hawk snapped.

Corpin was grieved. "God help us all," he said piously. "Single said if my conscience hurt me so much—which it does, badly—I should take the Greenies back to their village. He even offered to help me stage a mutiny against you if I'd promise to do that."

"But naturally," said Hawk, "you wouldn't even think of turning against me. Shut up, Corpin. Your hypocrisy makes me sick." Hawk jammed over the

cut-off, the black scowl lingering on his face. He should stop putting up with Corpin the Pious. Why did he at all? Deep in him he sensed the gross answer: the masochism of the sinful—and Corpin was a whip. . . .

THAT CONVERSATION planted a seed. Two and a half days after the *S. S. Sekwyn* blasted off on the five day run to the Eros slave-market, Hawk called Johnny Single to his cabin. Single entered, took one startled look at the dozen quiet-faced men who leaned against the walls, sat on the cot or other articles of furniture. There was a grim smiling spark in Hawk's eyes.

"John-boy," he said, "yesterday you offered Corpin to help mutiny if he'd take the Greenies back to Andriago."

Single's eyes were big on the weapon each man carried. Finally: "Corpin's crazy," he said. "He doesn't know sarcasm when he hears it."

"I figured you might be ribbing him," said Hawk. "Here's my proposition. I'm quitting this life. Slaving's a bit too rough a racket for me and I'm getting out. I've decided to take the Greenies back to Andriago. These men are all members of my original crew, and they're with me. Generally they get a commission on the sale of each Greenie. I'll make it good to them. Whose side you on?"

"Yours," said Single.

"Here's a gun," said Hawk. He passed a five-pound jim-cracker to Single. Hawk closely observed the way Single slowly passed two fingers into the trigger-guard.

"What gave you the idea?" Single said at last, meeting Hawk's eyes steadily. Hawk bitterly resented the knowing look.

"If you think it's Madge, you're crazy," he said shortly. "I had the stink of slave-running in my nose a long time before you entered the act. Now, men," he said, facing the others, "as far as Corpin knows, you're all off watch in your bunks; I arranged it that way months ago, you remember, in case it ever came to a showdown. The showdown's here. No killing if possible, but don't get fooled."

After having one of the men inspect the corridor outside, Hawk led the men in a

body down toward the engine-room, heart of the ship, from which every important function was controlled. They moved quietly, almost unbreathing. Outside the engine-room hatch, Hawk delegated three men to space themselves through the corridor, to nab any men who might not be stationed below. Then Hawk boldly opened the hatchway, entered, stood on the balcony overlooking the machine-filled engine-room. Here and there a man stood at his post; others were undoubtedly out of Hawk's line of sight. Corpin was not to be seen.

Hawk opened the door again, gestured to the men. Single fell into step behind Hawk as they easily descended the ladder to the engine-room deck.

"Take over your regular posts," Hawk spoke to those following him. "Tell the men it's my orders that they be relieved. If they object, shove your jim-crackers into their ribs. Might be a good thing if you do that anyway."

His eyes sharpened as three of the men drifted off toward the three men visible before the protonoclast gauges. He would have given a lot to know just where Corpin was; chances were—

The sudden, sharp crash of a jim-cracker set steel plates to ringing. Hawk whirled, in time to see Single's face pouring sweat, his blond hair awry on his forehead, and in his hand his jim-cracker, still spitting static.

Single was wildly, desperately excited. "It's a trap," he yelled at Hawk. "Corpin—I saw him up there at the port. I tried to blast him."

THERE WAS A ROW of portholes looking down on the engine room from the corridor where Hawk had his other men stationed. Hawk's stomach seemed to drop out of his body in a sickening swoop. A trap was impossible. Corpin wouldn't have known—*unless he had put the idea into Hawk's head.*

The metallic echoes of Single's fire had hardly ceased their reverberations when the engine-room was suddenly alive with men. From behind the machines, from every possible hiding place, Corpin's men poured, weapons drawn. Hawk blew out his breath, savagely let go with his jim-

cracker, glanced wildly toward the ladder. Instead of his men, Corpin and two others of the mutinous crew members appeared.

"You're outnumbered," Corpin roared down at Hawk. "Give up! I'll let you go with your life, Hawk!"

For answer, Hawk's arm flew up as if by subconscious impulse. The wild thought of murder was in his head. But he was bowled backward as two men overflowed him; the charge went wild and Hawk was flat on his back. From the direction his charge had traveled, Hawk saw a blue-white flare as the explosion came. He thought incredulously, *I hit the air-refiner. . . .*

His weapon was torn out of his hands. The chill recognition of utter disaster overcame him, but with it came recklessness as well. In him was the unholy desire for immolation, a manifestation of the same emotion which made him take Single's manhandling. He needed punishment, even the extreme punishment of dying with a jim-cracker in his gizzard. With a roar, he stretched himself erect, and tore into his attackers with an ugly, bloody delight.

Three men fell before his blows. Then Hawk stumbled—over Single's prone body.

In the act of falling, one of the wipers, a runt, stepped in at an angle, and with the full power of both clasped fists, caught Hawk across the back of the neck. Hawk fell to his knees, rose to his full height as if his reflexes might overcome the stunning force of that blow, and then fell conclusively flat on his face.

**H**AWK WAS LYING on his side when he awoke. He groaned miserably, rolled to his back. When the base of his skull touched the cold supra-steel floor of the cell, he jerked it out of contact, wincing with the thudding pain. For a while he was sick in every fiber of his beaten body. That passed. Then he smelled cigarette smoke and a cigarette was shoved between his lips.

"Smoke that," said Single, his voice moody.

Hawk lay perfectly motionless, keeping his eyes closed while he quietly smoked. Through his eyelids poured light, that of the 800-watt duro-globe set into the over-

heads above the cell. Without looking, Hawk knew every item of furnishing—two chairs, table, wall food-slot, crude washstand, Johnnie—they were imprisoned, in short, in the well-known brig, a cage of walls and bars composed of supra-steel. Escape from here was an impossible thought.

The brig was placed in the bottommost hold, a triangular compartment wedged in between the fission motors on one side and No. 2 rotor on the other, with inch-thick supra-steel walls between. Above the muted, pounding thrust of the rotor, Hawk could hear the leaf-like rustle of the Greenies' talk; they were also quartered here, in soil-bins stretching along the opposite side of the hold. Hawk had heard that Greenies talked, but had never been confronted with the fact.

He opened his eyes, rolled them until he saw Single, who was sitting cross-legged at the composition table.

"Listen to them talk, John-boy," Hawk said softly. "Makes you realize they might not be so far from being human."

"Yeah, it does, doesn't it?" Single's eyes were pale, lifeless, and wouldn't meet Hawk's.

Hawk said, his words remorseless as a lashing whip across his own back, "Oh, I know what you think of me, John-boy. Remember you asked me what gave me the idea of taking the Greenies back to Andrigo? John-boy, it was Corpin who planted the seed in my head, and watched it sprout. He was ready and waiting for me, any time I made the break. And I was fool enough not to realize it." He smoked, looking straight up toward the overheads. He mused, "How much of a fool can one man be in a lifetime, John-boy?"

"I'll tell you," said Single. His mood was the same, bitter and without life. "He can be fool enough to marry a girl who doesn't love him. That's me." He jerked his thumb indicatively against his chest. "You were the right man for her—you still could be. Now neither of us will see Earth again, much less Madge."

"Unless we fight our way free," said Hawk, sitting up. He decided he didn't like the trend of the conversation. Bleakly, he knew in his heart that the old romance



was dead; even the flowers of memory should not be laid at the sunken grave.

"What's our first step to freedom, for instance?" Single said, without interest.

Hawk said cryptically, "To want freedom. I want it, and all I want it for is to get those Greenies back to Andrigo. After that, I don't much care."

Single looked blank. Then he painfully rose; his clothes were half-torn off his body, his skin was lacerated and bruised in numerous places, indicating the terrific battle he'd put up. He gave Hawk a hand, pulled him to his feet. Single smiled wearily.

"You beat everything, Hawk. You took advantage of my angelic nature at Decimal Point, but in return you took me out on some fine binges with the idea of showing me about life. It's the same thing all over again, except—"

Hawk grinned, but said soberly, "Except that this time we might both learn about death."

Suddenly the Greenies set up an excited leaf-twitching, rushed to the bars of their cells. The rusted hatch door to the compartment was pushed aggressively open. The weirdly green, peaked faces of the Greenies were illuminated in the shaft of light from the outer compartment. Hawk and Single leaped to the bars, their eyes on the advancing figure. It was Corpin. He strode with lordly magnificence to the cell, pendulous jowls quivering with fury.

"I've been sinful in my day, Hawk," he snarled, "but my sins don't compare with your unGodly acts. I personally noted that you deliberately sent a bullet into the air-refinery. This means we have no air except that in the ship and we've still got three days in space. Possibly several crew members will die—including your so-called loyal men, who have sworn in with me now that your little coup is a failure. I'm here to warn you that we must therefore cut this compartment off from the air-circulating network."

Hawk studied him. "What about the Greenies?"

Corpin was really in a panic. "Who's worried about the Greenies at a time like this?" he blubbered. "This is serious, Hawk!" He started for the hatch door,

arms swinging like lumpy pendulums.

Hawk called sternly after him, "Am I to understand you intend for us to asphyxiate, Mr. Corpin?"

"I hope your air holds out," Corpin said. "That's all I can say for you and your friend, God rest you!"

The heavy, rusted door swung shut behind him, bounced open, subsided again to the shut position.

SINGLE WAS LOOKING at the door longingly. "Did you actually send a bullet into the air-refinery on purpose, Hawk?" he asked.

Hawk grunted. "Naturally not. That's Corpin's excuse to practice effortless murder." His deep eyes were roving the cell, lingered on the furniture. He started toward it. "Help me break up this table, John-boy," he said. His voice was uncertain. "Might be able to use a couple crow-bars."

By prodigious effort and the use of their belt-buckles as screwdrivers, they took the table apart. It required an hour or longer. Hawk used the table legs in an attempt to bend some of the bars. The bars had an almost non-existent coefficient of elasticity, however, and besides this, there was not enough leverage. Grimly and sweating, Hawk hurled the table-legs into a corner.

"Fine way to burn oxsh—oxshgen," His tongue got mixed in his mouth.

"Let's burn shome more." Single's voice was extraordinarily shrill, his eyes luminous. He cracked a match into flame. Hawk's eyes narrowed on the brilliant blue flare, then he thoughtfully took a cigarette. Suddenly, his mind seemed to skip a whole sequence of thoughts. When he was aware again, the cigarette was burned a quarter through, and he was pacing with terrific energy up and down the length of the brig. His mind soared. He was drunk!

"Thash it!" he shouted, stopping in his tracks. Unsteadily, he got in front of Single, who was senselessly pacing also; and, leaving the cigarette dangling from his lips, clamped his giant's hands on Single's shoulders.

Hawk's vision was blurred, but he focused long enough to see that the pupils of Single's eyes were big and out of con-

trol. "Shstand still," Hawk shouted thickly. "Schumping's wrong—but it's blasted good! We're blind drunk, oxshgen-drunk! It's the Greenies. That utter ignoramus Corpin!"

Single grinned laxly. "Have 'nother shigarette, Hawk of the Spashways. Burn up more oxygen. Too much oxygen, Hawk of the Spashways. Remember how they put us through oxygen tesh in a Spashship at Deshmal Point? Drunk then, too. Problem was to releash 'enough Shee-O-Two into the air to bring air back to normal. How'd you come out on that tesh, Hawk of Spashways?"

How had he come out? Hawk's brain was on fire, partly from the effort of thought. He brushed drunkenly past Single, hung on the bars, looking across at the Greenies.

Hawk could hear their twittering. In it was an eery, down-beat note that could be likened to a dirge. Forcing his eyes to focus by sheer will, Hawk saw the Greenies, slumped in weirdly contorted positions against the bars of the soil-bins.

They were smothering.

*Their air supply was bad.*

**I**N HAWK burgeoned the desire to laugh—a bubbling, chuckling emotion that grew unreasonably out of his horror. But even horror seemed funny. Gasping, he fell to hands and knees, crawled across the floor to Single, who was sprawled against the wall, smiling foolishly.

"Lishen, John-boy," said Hawk confidentially. "Think. During tesh at Deshmal Point I sholved problem. Wasn't orthodox. Professhors wanted to exshpel me.

"Shingle," he said patiently, when Single didn't answer. "Lishen. We're dying. Burning up. Not made to breathe pure oxshgen. We have to get some Shee-O-Two into the air. How'd I do it?"

Single's lips quirked with laughter. "Burned the fuvniture, thash what Hawk of Spashways did." Laboriously, Single heaved to his feet. "I'll help you. Wheresh oxshgen coming from? Thought Corpin wanted to shmother ush."

"Shu' he did," explained Hawk, as if he had all of eternity in which to elucidate.

"But his scheme backfired. The Greeniesh naturally breathed in all the Shee-O-Two and breathed out oxshgen. That makesh it bad for ush, wors for them. They're shuffocating, we're burning up . . . Thing is, bring air back to normal like I did at Deshimal Point when nasty professhors wanted to kick me out."

"Fine," said Single heartily. "Heresh my shirt."

Hawk accepted it with grave thanks. He stacked the table-top against the bars of the cell, used Single's shirt as kindling, applied flame. Hawk's brain was a bright pinwheel by this time. He had practically lost identity with duration, would forget his purpose in doing one thing no sooner than he started on another. But deep in his subconscious was an intense striving for an ultimate effect, a brass ring that his whirling conscious mind could only pluck at each time round.

This subconscious urging received a measure of gratification when flame blossomed through the shirt, bit eagerly into the table-top. It was a white-hot flame, burned with a sizzling fury.

"Good work, Hawk of Spashways," smiled Johnny Single. "Pretty fire, Hawk of Spashways. Bet Corpin could kick him-shelf."

Behind the red film drawn across his eyes, the alert part of Hawk's brain sat like a crouched animal in the back of his head. The fire shot up with pristine purity, a lactescent flame without the betraying yellowness of escaping gases. With the concentrated fury of an oxygen-torch it beat against the supra-steel bars against which the table-top leaned. When these bars glowed first red and then began to assume the whitish color of the flames laving them, Hawk aroused Single by slapping his face, palm and backhand. Single took it in the spirit in which it was intended, rose. Hawk shoved one table leg at him, took the other.

"Gotta work fast, John-boy," he muttered. "No more fuel. Faster the fuel burns, lesh oxshen, shlower fuel burns, lesh heat. Catch?"

"Sure," said Single. "Makesh lotsh of Shee-O-Two for Greenies, though."

Two of the bars which stretched from

deck to overheads were now at white heat for two feet of their length, were soft enough to yield to the battering blows the two men now directed against them. Then sparks arose in a spitting shower as the table-top crashed in ruins. The two men leaped back. A wounded expression appeared on Single's face as he slapped at the burns on face and bare chest. Hawk kept on ramming at his bar, endeavoring to widen the space of escape. But the bar was scaling down to red, now that there was no flame on it. Single solved the problem by holding the already charred end of his improvised battering ram in the coals on the floor. It caught flame instantly. Single held it against the bar Hawk was working on. So furiously and potently did the virtually pure oxygen of the atmosphere unite with its fuel that the bar again whitened, softened. At each plunking blow it gave another inch.

Over the labored panting of Hawk, the spit of flame, the pound of the battering ram, came a growing murmur from the Greenies. Hawk was elated. It was obvious that enough carbon dioxide had been added to the air to revive the suffocating plant-people. Conversely, Hawk felt less of that heady, disagreeable drunkenness he had experienced before the oxygen percentage went down. He gave the bar a final blow, and then, with a huge grin of triumph, tossed his battering ram crashing into a corner.

"That's it," he shouted at Single. "Let up. You're feeling better?"

"God, yes." Single dropped the consumed table-leg in time to avoid burning his fingers. He weaved weakly to a chair, fell into it. "I'm all burned out."

Hawk took the other chair, set fire to it. "There's still too much oxygen in the air for us or the Greenies. Let's sit on the floor for awhile. Throw that chair on too. Then we'll get the hell out of here."

WHEN THE FIRE burned with yellow, fairly lazy tongues of flame, the two men slipped through the cooled aperture in the cell bars. In the cells opposite, the Greenies were clustered solid at the bars. Hawk grinned at them, a bit dizzily—the last vestiges of the oxy-

gen-jag disappearing.

"Chummy rascals," said Hawk. It almost embarrassed him to feel a dormant conscience leaping to life.

Single nodded. "They sense you're on their side, Quinn. Probably you couldn't have a better character-endorsement."

Hawk flung him a look. "So what should I do, carry one around in my pocket as a testimonial?"

"Madge won't need much persuading," said Single.

"Who said anything about Madge? You talk too much. Let's get out of here."

As soon as they set foot in the outer compartment and Hawk smelled the peculiar deadness of the air—caused partly by lack of air-circulation, partly by out-size amounts of See-O-Two—Hawk's plan leaped full-born into his head.

"I think we're going to lick Corpin, the bloated psalm-singer," he told Single. "The next compartment is right by the engine-room. It's a storage compartment, and there's at least a ton of waste in the bins, waiting for us to set fire to it. Then watch those rats scuttle into the trap! First we need some air-helmets, if they haven't already commandeered them—in which case we'll have to get along without 'em!"

"First, I need a shirt," said Single, gesturing at his nakedness.

Hawk tossed Single his jacket, then led the way. With luck, they shouldn't run into much opposition at first; most of the men would be concentrated in the engine-room or else off-watch in their bunks. He led Single to the upper deck. Hawk was just working the combination-lock on the lazarette when he heard a footstep. He and Single froze tensely against the lazarette door. The man who came into sight was big Nibley, who had been one of Hawk's original crew-members in the day when Hawk's only business venture was the fairly honest one of running weapons to the beleaguered colonists on Triton. Hawk hoped against hope that Nibley would go on past, but the big man saw them instantly. His mouth fell open while he stared.

Hawk stepped out into the open.

"Fall in with us, Nibley," he said softly. "With luck, we'll be able to take over from Corpin."

Painful uncertainty passed over Nibley's face. Then he blurted, "I can't, Hawk! You haven't got a chance! Corpin would murder me!"

HE SPUN on his heel, ran panting toward the nearest ladder. Bitterly disappointed, Hawk went off after him, caught him by the belt, yanked, chopped savagely at his temple. Nibley squirmed on the deck. Hawk hit him again, convulsively, then came back to the lazarette, panting.

"That's the kind of loyalty I can expect," he growled. He jerked open the lazarette door. The room was well stocked. The men buckled each other's air-helmets; then Hawk stuck broken matches into the oxygen valves of the remaining few helmets. The oxygen hissed out, and would continue to do so until the tiny tanks were empty. They took a jim-cracker apiece from the wall, then descended to the next deck again, entered the storage compartment adjacent to the engine-room. Here Hawk tossed a lighted match into a bin of waste. A sluggish flame came into being; but since the oxygen content of the air was already low, clouds of humid smoke snuffed it out.

For a moment that worried Hawk; then he saw smoke still rolling out, and assumed that the kindling point was being maintained, that the waste would rapidly smoulder. Which made it even better for his purpose.

"Let's get an armful of this waste, John-boy." Hawk gestured to a nearby bin, ignored Single's puzzled look. By the time the compartment was heavy with smoke, they were loaded up and staggering toward the engine-room door. Hawk freed two fingers to pull at the handle, then kicked the door open the rest of the way. The difference in temperature between the engine-room and the smoke-filled compartment instantly created a suction effect—the hotter air in the engine room grabbed at the cooler smoke, brought it rolling in in great turgid masses.

Under cover of the smoke barrier, Hawk lighted the new fuel, threw it twenty feet down into the engine room. Above the spit of the protonoclasts and the rolling pound of the rotors, Hawk heard men

shouting. He gripped the railing; through a rift in the voluminous clouds he saw men running, beating at the smoldering masses of waste. Hawk's eyes snapped, narrowed as he saw Corpin actually running toward the center of the disturbance, his eyes puffy and already reddened from smoke. Corpin was carrying a fire-extinguisher. He was about to up-end it when Hawk pulled his jim-cracker, and, aiming with extreme care, shot it out of his hands. Corpin stood stricken, slowly raising his eyes as if they would inevitably be drawn to the avenging figure at the railing. Inspired hate distorted his face; he pulled his own weapon, but whirlpools of smoke seemed to suck him under. The shot never came.

"More waste," Hawk snapped at Single, but Single had already gone and was back with another armload. Hawk threw it overboard, then grabbed at Single and felt his way down the broad ladder. As they reached the deck, choking shadows darted past them, grabbed at the ladder, and dragged themselves up. Hawk blundered past several machines, anxious to get to the air-pumps, fearful that Corpin would get there first. However, at that moment Hawk heard Corpin's voice nearby, screaming wordlessly in a high vindictive tone—he saw the fat shadowy form fighting through the smoke, reached out and grabbed.

Corpin choked rackingly. Primeval loathing showed in his almost blinded eyes when he saw Hawk.

"I might have known," he snarled. "The great brain from Decimal Point can't think of any better way to take over the ship than to burn up our few remaining liters of oxygen. That space-helmet will last you approximately another hour. Then you'll be as dead as the rest of us."

He lunged, kicking mightily at Hawk's groin. Hawk leaped back, grabbed Corpin by the ankle, brought him down with a sodden thump. He whipped a boot-tip at the fat throat, but Corpin rolled, was swallowed by smoke. Hawk heard his cough ascending the ladder. Single worriedly started after, but Hawk gently stopped him.

"He can't go where the smoke can't follow him," he told Single. "I'll show you. This way." He stopped at the waste-dis-

posal slot. Here a pile of oily waste had collected. Hawk scooped up a great armful. Single followed suit. Hawk dumped it at the base of the air-circulating pumps, which were at present not in operation, and threw over the switch. The pump-motors whirled into action. Smoke was sucked through the grating. Single caught on instantly, chuckled.

**H**AWK CAREFULLY STUDIED the ventilator-duct board. Here, by remote control, he could cut off or close any compartment in the ship to the action of the air-pumps. Which meant he could fill the ship with smoke. He started throwing most of the ducts open.

It was Single who thought of the Greenies. "Lord, by this time they're suffocating on too much oxygen again, Quinn! Maybe a little smoke—"

Hawk whitened. If the Greenies died, so would everybody else. He opened the Greenies' duct wide, then hurriedly set fire to the new pile of waste. The dirty smoke poured into the ventilators like a river. After a minute, however, Hawk closed the Greenies' duct; that too was part of the plan. But now a devil of uncertainty was plaguing him. If the Greenies were dead—

He waited a short while longer in increasing nervousness. Then he stepped to the auditory system of speaking-tubes, switched the connections over to "general." He tuned the amplification up so that his voice would have a booming, all-powerful impact.

"Men," he stated raspingly, "Corpin has made fools of you! If you think he's fitted for command, even of a junk-heap like this one, you're bigger fatheads than I thought. Even with the help of God, he wasn't able to make a go of it. When he discovered the air-refinery was blinko, he went addle-pated, didn't have the brains to remember that Greenies, being plants, produce oxygen and would have made a good air-refinery themselves. They still will! So now get busy! Tell Corpin to go to hell! Get his keys to the Greenies' cell! Circulate the Greenies through the ship! Then when you're ready to acknowl-

edge your mistake, call me back by audio and I'll let up on this smoke. But remember that I'm master aboard this man's ship!"

The speaking-tube zipped back into place. Hawk pulled his jim-cracker, exploring it with his fingers to make sure it was in working order. Single felt toward him, started to speak, but Hawk said savagely, "Don't worry, John-boy, I know approximately what I'm doing. Keep that smoke pouring in there while I'm gone, and shoot anybody that might try to stop you."

Single hesitated. Then he said patiently, "I was going to say I don't think the crew will throw over Corpin just on the basis of what you told them. You've just given Corpin some brand-new information to do you in with. Better not trust him."

"I'm not!"

Nor any of the crew either, Hawk thought glumly as he went on the double to the next deck; Nibley had taught him his lesson. Blast the man who'd let his whole life go to pot, mix in with a bunch of swill, just because a woman threw him over.

**O**UTSIDE THE HOLD where the Greenies were captive, Hawk rested comfortably against a bulkhead, a grim smile touching his lips. He wasn't any too soon. Dim, coughing shapes came footing it through the thick smoke. The glow-lamps set into the overheads showed the men only as shadows, but Hawk was able to count those shadows; twenty-six all told, and that included Nibley—and Corpin. Never was flight more precipitous; the hatch door slammed shut triumphantly as the men entered the only place aboard ship where there was a reasonable guarantee of oxygen.

The trap had worked to perfection.

If the Greenies were still alive . . . The doubt had Hawk gritting his teeth. Finally he could stand it no longer, went in long strides toward the door—and at that moment the door slammed open, and Corpin stood on the threshold, breathing big with excitement and triumph, plainly visible against the light inside the Greenies' compartment.

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At the first renewed breath of smoke, he fell to choking, swore aggrievedly. He closed the door halfway. After he had stopped choking, his triumphant voice came:

"The fool! The soft, stupid fool! Stick to me, men; believe me, I'll take you to heights Hawk never dreamed of. Once we have enough money, we'll be able to move in the ways of God. But not before."

He paused, one finger pressed thoughtfully into his pudgy cheek.

"Here's the strategy, men. We have to take the engine-room from Hawk and that Single fellow. We'll herd the Greenies in front of us. They'll more or less clear the smoke and leave us a path of oxygen to travel through. Between you and I, Hawk won't have the guts to shoot a Greenie." He chuckled. "We'll play Hawk's game better than he can."

Hawk glided silently forward a few feet. He struck his jim-cracker a few inches from Corpin's face. His voice came jarringly:

"Corpin, the game's already played out."

Corpin's head pivoted on its fat neck, small eyes wild with shock. As he took in the terrifying reality of Hawk's presence, his face turned ashy.

"As God is my witness," he blurted, "you have always been my friend, Hawk!"

"That," said Hawk, "I am sure of. Start passing out the Greenies."

For answer, Corpin's pendulous lips firmed with desperate resolve. He moved a mere inch. The hatch door, which was being held open only by his bulk, swung hard against Hawk's gun hand. Hawk's brain seemed to rock in its cranial fluid as agony shot up his arm. There was a moment of incredulity when he saw his five-pound jim-cracker drop from his numbed fingers, felt himself spinning around to keep balance.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Corpin scrabbling in a panic of haste at his jim-cracker. In order to get a shot in at Hawk, Corpin had to have a line of fire. He heaved his mountainous shoulder against the door.

The process of thought hardly described what occurred in Hawk's head. He could attempt to regain his balance. To

snatch up the jim-cracker. By which time he would be dead. He chose instead, not by thought, but by instinct and animal reaction, to add speed to his inadvertent spin. He completed the turn in time to meet the weight of the opening door.

Corpin's shot almost blasted in his eardrums. Hawk heaved the mass of his body against the door, momentarily felt the resistance of Corpin's body, then heard Corpin's anguished shout as he was forced to give way. Hawk smashed the door shut, then used the reaction to that motion to send him in the opposite direction toward his jim-cracker.

He scooped it up.

By that time, the door had bounced open again, as was its habit. Corpin was ready; but so was Hawk. Corpin's fingers contracted on the trigger—but the shot never came. Hawk's charge caught him low in the stomach, opened him from hip to hip. Corpin gulped, belched blood, leaned forward. When he fell, he rolled, almost to the feet of his staring men.

"Hold it!" Hawk yelled, when two of the men made as if to draw. He leaped to the threshold of the compartment, his lips drawn up in an acid, mirthless grin.

"You men turned against me," he said. "That's all right. I'm dumping you off at the first civilized port we hit. I'm getting you and all the rotten things we've stood for out of my hair. Now get the Greenies out of those cells. Get yourselves in. Later, I'll pick out six or eight of you to help get this ship back to Andrigo. But you'll work in chains."

MOODILY, Hawk watched the last of the Greenies scurry down the gangway and vanish among the dusty dunes of Andrigo. There went his old life; now he could begin with the new. But the resolve didn't impress him. He cared no more for a life of respectability than he did for one as a slaver. He told Single as much.

Single shrugged. "There are other ways to respectability than sitting in a white cottage with roses around the front door the rest of your life, Quinn. For instance—well, one slaver runner less doesn't wipe out the trade in Greenies. And one more

average, respectable man added to society doesn't help them keep supplied with the auxin they need in order to live. If a man really wanted to move in the ways of God—somebody with guts, Quinn—he could do something about it. Catch?"

Hawk's studied him through slitted eyes. "No," he said abruptly; then turned away from Single's penetrating blue eyes, giving himself the excuse that he had to get the ship to the asteroidal repair station a half million miles farther on. But Single stopped him, grinning.

"For instance, Quinn, you could organize the SFPOM—Society For The Protection

Of Minorities."

Hawk's dark face turned a perfect crimson. "Really getting back at me, aren't you?" he demanded. "Maybe I'll call that bluff, John-boy. The blasted government doesn't give a care about the Greenies, but the right man could tell the government to go to, and knock the slavers out of the sky."

"And what about Madge?"

Hawk's shoulders hunched as if at a blow. He fought a short-lived battle. Whether he won it or lost was problematical. "When the time comes, I'll go back to her," he said. "If she'll have me."

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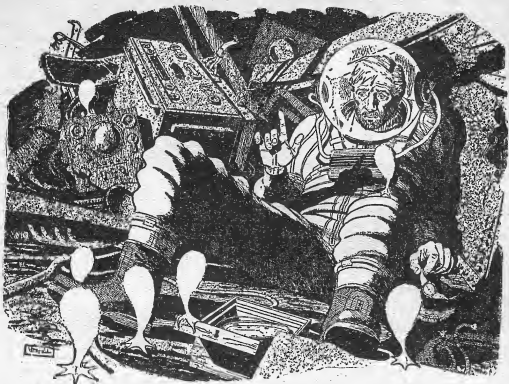
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*The death-winds of Venus screamed with glee as George Main lay dying. Then the winds brought strange shapes to haunt him—and a stranger hope—*



*Idly, George led the dance with a waggled forefinger . . .*

# SIGN of LIFE

by DAVE DRYFOOS

GEORGE MAIN LAY DYING IN the wreckage of the space-ship. Dying—and cursing the deadly wind of Venus. It had killed his mates. It would soon have him.

The wind was trying to finish him off right now. It shrieked, moaned, whispered and shouted through the smashed hull where he sprawled in his space-suit. Laughed, too. The wind was a murderer—and was glad.

All but he were dead. Soon the grit-laden wind would bury them and their ship. Then all the effort, the skill, the

faith—all the ingenuity and labor expended on the expedition—would be wiped away, as invisible as the wind that buried them.

Thinking of that, thinking back over each agonizing hour since his landing on Venus, George Main wondered what he should have done, what he could now do, to prevent the utter waste of their efforts and their lives.

The wind was his enemy—and the wind couldn't even be seen. Only the dust it carried was visible. Too visible. Dust was so thick in the upper atmosphere that the



scope-readers had mistaken dust-clouds for solid ground.

With ports blinded by dust, the possibility of that error had been obvious enough. The navigator knew the risk. He chanced it—and lost the toss.

George knew he was still alive only because he'd acted like a childish eager-beaver. And had been tolerated by the others because he was the crew's youngest member.

Ever since he could read and dream, he'd wanted to be the first man ever to touch the soil of Venus. So, having no duties connected with setting down the ship, he'd gotten into his space-suit and had waited by a hatch. He was standing there when the ship went into the twenty-mile free fall that smashed it.

George didn't know who opened the escape hatch and shoved him out. That man was dead, along with the rest of the crew. Unlike George's suit, the space-ship had no parachute.

**H** E'D LANDED BLIND, in dust so thick he didn't know he was down till he got there. For forty-eight hours he'd lain where he fell, waiting for a lull in the storm so he could see the ship.

When the wind finally quit, the ship was already half buried. Thirsty, hungry, stinking in the hot suit, George had staggered over windrow after windrow of dust to reach it.

He'd broken out an emergency-jug of water, found some uncontaminated food, erected within the hull a small gas-proof tent, and then passed out before he could crawl in the tent to eat and drink.

Later he'd gone out while the hull continued, to search for bodies. Like the hull itself, they were scattered over a wide area. Some were already buried in dust. The wind had buried them.

The wind—the murdering wind. The wind of formaldehyde that poisoned every drop of water it touched, every bit of food. The wind that limited George's supplies to unbroken containers— of which there were tragically few.

The wind mocked him, then and thereafter. It mocked his efforts to find the

ship's log and continue it. It mocked his efforts to live.

He tried to fight back. He lay prone and relaxed because that took less oxygen. He lay in the suit and not in the tent because that took less oxygen. He ate and drank but once a day because that took less oxygen.

So he had run out of water while there were still some potassium oxides left to refresh his thrice-breathed air, some oxygen for the tent.

George Main wanted to live, knew he would die. And was enraged at the thought that he would die without having accomplished anything. He and his friends, and the pioneering scientists back of them, had put too much effort into trans-System travel to have it all come to nothing like this.

Stubbornly he noted in the log that he was now dehydrated to the point of occasional delirium. And that he hated the wind.

As if that wind had not already done enough, it now sought to destroy his last remaining moments of sanity. It brought a horde of odd shapes to haunt him.

The shapes literally rolled into the dust-filled metal cavity where he lay writing. The wind rolled them. But when they got into shelter—had rolled to one side or the other of the holes through which they'd come—the shapes began to move, slowly, under their own power.

They all looked alike. There were a couple of dozen, maybe— George counted ten and gave up because counting was too much like work. They were teardrops—eight-inch yellow teardrops with the point down. And each point rested on an extensible foot that looked like a blue starfish, about four inches across its seven points.

They came in, rolling along the ground as the wind took them, and then extended their stars from some hidden place and moved on them when out of the wind.

That is, they seemed to. But whether they were in the hull or in his mind, George was by no means sure.

Nothing could live in this wind. Nothing could live on a planet with no water, where the air was full of formaldehyde

ready to react with proteins, the basis of life.

He lay motionless, watching idly. There was no sound but the wind. The yellow teardrops scattered out. They could have been exploring—or seeking shelter—or nonexistent.

When he got tired of watching them, George put the log aside and slept.

**H**E AWOKE to find a small congregation of teardrops surrounding the watch strapped outside the suit on his left wrist. The watch was going—wound through habit every twenty-four hours, though that was but a third of a day, here on Venus. The teardrops were curious about it.

How he got the idea they were curious, George didn't quite know. They seemed attracted to it, was all. There were no eyes, so far as he could tell—no ears. If these things had senses, they were not like terrestrial senses. But the teardrops did have an attitude of attention.

George removed his watch, laid it before them. Two teardrops detached themselves from the group to examine his right hand, with which he'd slipped off the wrist-band. Three others perched on the dust-covered deck, the watch between them and him.

George flexed his right hand, twiddled his fingers. The teardrops seemed unafraid. He chose one and lifted it. It seemed light in weight. Its star-foot was slightly prehensile, and grasped his glove with tiny claws arranged in rows on its bottom surface.

The claws seemed for clinging, not for seizing. George put down the teardrop, turned it over, and found no opening anywhere on the surface. If these things lived, he decided, they must be plants, synthesizing their food—they had no way to eat as animals do.

Vaguely, George made up his wavering mind that the things existed outside his imagination. They were alive. They felt curiosity about him. Leathery, he found them—hard and smooth, except for the foot.

When he set down the teardrop he'd been examining, the three by his watch took up a rhythmic motion. The center

one stood in place, swaying slowly above the watch like a bit of seaweed in a quiet lagoon.

Each of the other two had somehow obtained a pebble. They set their pebbles down near the watch. Each then tapped with a star-point, first at the pebble, then at the watch. Back and forth they swayed, their motions synchronized—perhaps directed by the center one.

Interesting—but meaningless. It was equally meaningless when the two teardrops at his right began to dance. They found an empty food-can lid, pushed it near his hand, and began a concerted swaying and pointing that took them between hand and can.

Idly, George led the dance with a wag-gled forefinger. The teardrops promptly changed their motion. They stood in place, no longer pointing alternately at lid and finger, but swaying between them in time with George.

They were slow, though—he could easily have left them behind. But if he moved his finger slowly enough, they kept perfect time.

The dance at the watch had stopped. Many teardrops gathered around the pair that followed the beat of his right index finger.

It must have amused them. But it soon tired George. He stopped.

He needed all his remaining energy to think with. He knew these teardrops were sentient. They were curious, they communicated with each other, and they danced. They had minds, therefore.

**G**EORGE remembered hearing that Man had danced even before he learned to speak, in a primitive effort to express his feelings. He knew some birds dance, too—as a courtship procedure. Insects, even.

But why did the teardrops dance?

What was the significance of rhythmic motion between a pebble and a watch? A tin lid and a man's hand? What did the pebbles mean?

The pebble was a native object, known to be lifeless, inanimate. The watch was a strange something that moved. The can-lid did not move. The hand—gloved,

though they could not know that—was an object that moved.

The dance was a question, therefore. Alive, or dead? The teardrops wanted to know. Is the watch that moves by itself alive? The strangely symmetrical lid of a can, is it alive? The oddshaped hand?

These teardrops had good minds—could grasp abstractions. In a sense, George felt, the difference between animate and inanimate objects is an abstraction. In his dying state, the notion amused him.

Smiling, he placed a pebble on the watch, another on the lid. He sat up, moved his weakened body so they could perhaps tell it was a unit. He picked up a teardrop in each hand, held them at his visor, rolled his eyes, and opened and shut his mouth. He spoke to them. He sang to them. He swayed with them to show he too could dance.

They made no sign of reply. None that he could recognize, at any rate.

Carefully he felt and looked at the entire surface of a teardrop, putting one down to devote both hands to the other. He thought perhaps the lack of organs and openings might simply mean they were clothed or armored in some way. But the thing was apparently naked. The surfaces he touched were probably skin. He didn't know.

And they, would they know what a man was? Were they even certain he was alive?

One of them was behind him, dancing before the tent. Seeing that, he was certain the teardrops hadn't yet distinguished the animate from the inanimate in the objects around them here.

And George had little time to teach them. Already he was dull and listless. His vision was playing tricks on him.

Like as not he'd be dead before they knew for certain he'd been alive. Dead in the grotesque space-suit. Preserved in an atmosphere of formaldehyde. His body would seem like a machine that had run down. There would be no discernable difference between himself and his watch.

But if they knew he'd been alive? They might remember, then. They were intelligent, could communicate with one another. By rights they should have some kind of legends or traditions or history. If they did, if they knew they'd seen alien life, they'd keep the memory alive.

They'd recognize the next man to land on Venus, might find means to tell of this first expedition. Might lead a man to the buried space-ship, the bodies, the ship's log.

At least they could defeat the wind. The teardrops could keep his life and the lives of his mates from going utterly to waste. Whether men ever found out or not, the teardrops themselves would know that the expedition had reached Venus.

But first, George had to prove he was alive, like them—not some strangely mobile meteorite, nor oddly contrived machine.

His very lack of strength, his real nearness to death, provided George with the means he sought. Already he was half anesthetized by weakness and shock. He didn't have to worry about pain.

Holding his breath, he took off his helmet. He picked up a teardrop with each hand, held them to his hot cheeks. Then he let himself breathe.

He knew the physical changes to follow would be obvious to the intelligent little dancers he held in his hands. He hoped they wouldn't get hurt, when they fell.

Hurt or not, they'd soon figure out he'd been alive—once he was dead. . . .

*Colonizing Mars was hell, because of one thing—large, hungry critters. They flew, crawled, snarled, howled, burrowed up under the floors, chewed at doors and windows. And then, to make things worse, came the Monster . . .*



*As it rose high, he aimed, giving it a wide beam . . .*

# MONSTER

by WILLIAM MORRISON

**T**HERE WAS A FAINT scratching at the door, so faint that Alice Kidd, who had been listening fearfully for precisely that sound, was at first not certain that she heard it. But, as she came close to the doorway, it was no longer possible to doubt, and a chill went through her at the thought of the creature panting eagerly on the other side. Now she could hear it whine, and, despite

her knowledge that the gesture was an idle one, she could not help once more feeling the bolt behind the door. Then she made sure that the shutters too were securely barred, although these were usually in less danger; most of the animals could not apply pressure very far above the ground.

Small was staring at her, not particularly frightened, but very much interested. Her face, she thought, must be pale through the

radiation tan. Ordinarily, there was nothing timid or fragile about her, or she would never have accompanied her husband to Mars; but all the same, she felt weak and helpless before the danger that threatened. And she shuddered as her five-year-old son asked, "Can it get in, Mommy?"

"I hope not, darling. Come, let's go into the other room and bolt the connecting door. And then I'll call up Daddy."

"Does it want to eat us, Mommy?"

Alice shuddered again. "Don't talk about it," she said, and carried him quickly into the next room. When the door was bolted, she pressed the contact button, asked for Mr. Kidd, and almost at once was speaking to Anthony.

He listened quietly, his dark face in the visor as grave as if he were concerned with some problem of engineering, and then said in a tone of reassurance, "Don't worry, it can't get in. Not under a couple of hours, anyway. And even if it does, you have that gun."

"That explosive thing?"

"It'll do, if you keep your nerve. But I don't think you'll have to put it to the test. I'm coming home now, anyway, and I'll take care of our friend. Have any idea what it is?"

"I haven't seen it. It just whines a little, and keeps scratching, very quietly."

"Probably a badgerine. Hope it doesn't try to tunnel under the floor. All right, sugar, keep your shirt on, and the Mars Marines will be there to the rescue."

"Take care of yourself."

"And how. Think I want you to be left with all that insurance money and fall victim to some fortune-hunter who sees nothing in you but your beautiful bank account?"

**H**E HUNG UP, and Alice waited, trembling. In the room where she was, she could no longer hear the straining animal, but she knew that it hadn't gone away. She tried to get interested in some of Small's childish treasures. The blocks he had long outgrown, and they kept the things only because there was no one to give them to, and it seemed silly to throw

anything away here. Besides, Alice had the idea that her son might have a brother or a sister some day soon, if they ever decided it was possible to raise a baby here, and toys were difficult to import. As for Small's magic hypno-ray ring, his imitation teleport bracelet, and his genuine imitation home teleset and similar objects, all obtained either by sending away one quarter credit in stamps plus a cereal box-top or by selling a special perfumed soap to his neighbors—which in this case meant his parents—she had always found it difficult to arouse any interest in them. She had, in fact, been slightly annoyed at Anthony's indulgence of his son's desire to obtain them. And it was impossible to simulate interest now, with that animal at the door.

And then, suddenly, the animal wasn't there any longer. She didn't hear any noise from Anthony's gun. It wasn't that kind. She felt simply the shock of contact as the missile went through the creature's body and shook the house. Then came a long, despairing chorus of yells, and after that, for a moment, silence. She withdrew the bolt of the connecting door, and then the buzzer sounded.

When Anthony came in, she fell into his arms. Small, however, wasn't having any emotional excitement. He said, "What was it, Daddy? Was it really a badgerine?"

"Not this time, son. Just an octerocap."

"As if the other wasn't bad enough," said Alice faintly. The octerocap was an eight-headed wolf, and was as likely to kill newcomers by the fright its appearance induced as much as by its numerous teeth. "Anthony, you must simply get me another gun like yours."

"You can take mine if you really feel unsafe."

"You know I wouldn't take it. You need yours to get home with. And there isn't so much danger as long as you're within calling range. But in case of emergency—"

He nodded. "Do you think I don't realize that? I've been cabling that idiot, Tapling, for another gun ever since we got here. Not a chance."

"But why? Does he think that the government sends engineers to Mars for the

purpose of having them killed and eaten by animals?"

"Tapling's is not to reason why, it's but to do according to regulations and let others die. He says that Regulation L34-XC3 of Code 3 forbids it."

"The stupid fool!"

"Call him by his right name. That Idiot Tapling, or T. I. Tapling, as we usually denote him at the office."

"Is he the same way to them?"

"And how! Operations have been dragging along at half of capacity because he says we haven't filled out the necessary forms for those spare parts we need. And we can't fill them out, because the forms have to be countersigned by the vice-president in charge of Operation M54, and that gentleman is vacationing somewhere in space with a new bride, and can't be located. So you see, darling, you're cursing him in good company."

Even at that, as Anthony might have pointed out, he was suppressing a good part of what might have been said of Mr. Tapling. At the mines where Anthony and his fellow engineers worked, everything was completely automatic, and the dozen men were needed only for checking and repairs. It was T. I. Tapling who had done his best to ruin their lives.

THE HOUSES he had ordered built for them were not too bad. To be reasonably invulnerable to the drill-toothed animals who abounded on these wastes, the walls would have had to be about a dozen feet thick; and Tapling had had no grounds for suspecting that fact, which had not been in any of the reports he had read. But it was unquestionably his fault that the houses were so widely scattered. Dealing with a planet where the sunlight was weak and ultra-violet was obtained chiefly from artificial radiation, a planet where the air was so cold that no one went outdoors unless he had to, T. I. Tapling had been worried about living space and had generously allotted to each engineer and his family territory uninhabited for a couple of miles in every direction. Possibly he expected them to grow vegetables next to their houses. Apparently he had no suspicion that he was making things

as easy as possible for the predatory animals.

And of all locations, Anthony and Alice had the worst. Their house was most isolated, was the most difficult to get to from the office, and was in the part of the country most liable to attack. It was little wonder that Alice said, as she had said so often before, "But we *must* do something. Do you think we could have an electric barrier set up?"

"We could not. That's against regulation something or other too. Might kill friendly animals."

"But there isn't a single animal that's friendly!"

"Tell that to regulations and their guardian, Mr. Tapling."

Small looked up and said, "Mommy, we ought to get a dog."

Anthony nodded. "Our brilliant son is correct. Just as correct as he was when he first suggested it two months ago."

"But, Anthony, you know how much food costs here. He'd eat us out of—"

"Dogs eat animals," announced Small. "Space Dragooners says so in his television program."

"Small's right," agreed Anthony. "I'll bet an octerocap has eight different kinds of vitamins, one for each head. We ought to try eating one ourselves and save money."

"Ugh!"

"I want to eat an octerocap," said Small. "He wants to eat me, so I don't see why I shouldn't eat him."

"Never heard more perfect logic in my life," observed Anthony with pride. "That's my boy. However, let's put the lesson in logic aside for a moment, and repair the damage the thing caused. Get the plastic metal, Alice."

But Small was not to be so easily sidetracked. When the repairs to the door had been completed, he said, as if continuing a conversation that had been going on all the time, "Are we getting the dog soon, Daddy?"

"I think we are, Small. Then, for a change, I think your Mommy will feel safe in the house."

"I'll call him, 'Rover,'" decided Small.

"'Rover' let it be. He'll be unique—"

the only dog on Mars with that name. In fact, the only dog on Mars."

"I'm unique too, Daddy. I'm the only boy on Mars called 'Small'."

"It's not your real name, you know."

"It is so," asserted Small. "'Anthony, Jr.' is just a nickname. When I start going to television school, I'm going to tell the teacher that my name is Small Kidd."

Alice had been thinking. She said, "Anthony, dear, instead of writing for a dog, why don't you try again to get one of those new guns? I'm sure that if you did fill out a form—"

"I've filled out thousands. But don't worry, dear, I'll write T. I. Tapling again. Just don't expect too much, though."

Alice tried to pretend that she didn't, but in her heart she felt a pang of disappointment when Tapling wrote back that additional guns were forbidden not only by Regulation L34XC3 of Code 3, but by virtue of certain other regulations as well. He was pleased, however, to reply favorably to Mr. Kidd's other request, and enclosed forthwith a copy of a catalogue published by the Central Terrestrial Dog Breeding Station.

**A**LICE'S FIRST THOUGHT was that for once Mr. Tapling had done something right, and without wrapping his action up in red tape. Alice's second thought was, "That Idiot Tapling!"—for the catalogue, it turned out, was three hundred years old. It had been published some time before the first Mars expedition had taken off, and she could only wonder from what antique waste-paper pile the bureaucratic T. I. Tapling's bureaucratic subordinates had dug it up.

It was, nonetheless, fascinating reading, and Small was even more fascinated by the pictures it contained. Moreover, with a catalogue actually in the house, he seemed to regard her as definitely committed to get Rover. He wavered in his favorites for that title between Great Danes and Saint Bernards, and Alice, as she contemplated the size of the two breeds, could only think of the enormous quantities of food they would consume, and shudder in dismay.

She put up one final feeble struggle that

same night, when Anthony came home, and Small showed him the wonders in the new book. "Look, Daddy, this one looks like a sheep!"

"It's a Bedlington Terrier."

"Can we eat it?"

"No. It may look like a sheep, but it eats like a dog. What kind do you want?"

"He wants a big one," said Alice. "Great Dane or St. Bernard."

"How about an Irish Wolfhound?"

"Is that a big one, Daddy?"

"Tallest in the book."

"Maybe we should choose that," said Alice tentatively. "That is," she corrected herself, "if we choose any at all. And I rather doubt whether we should."

"It's up to you."

"Think of the cost of feeding a big dog!"

"But I told you before, it will probably feed on the animals it kills."

"Suppose it doesn't kill any?"

"It had better," said Anthony. "That's why I sent for the catalogue. We'll have to take a look at the qualities of the different breeds, and not depend entirely on Small's otherwise excellent criterion of size. We want a dog that's kind and affectionate with a child; tough, adaptable, a good hunter; and easy to care for. There are several that seem to fit the bill, but of course it's hard to be sure from a catalogue alone. And a lot depends on the individual dog, too. Why not tell the Dog Breeding Station what we want, and leave the final choice up to them?"

"But we're not sure—"

It was at that moment that for the first time there came a scratching not at the door, but at the shutter.

Alice looked at her husband and her child, and then hugged the latter closely. "Thank God you're home," she told Anthony.

The shutters were not as resistant as the doors, and they both knew it. But for the moment, the creature outside seemed to have trouble making up its mind. The scratching stopped, and then began again, at another shutter.

"As long as it isn't at the door, I have a chance to slip out before it can slip in—I hope," said Anthony. He picked up his

gun. "Get Small behind the other door, and bar it."

"Don't be silly. I'll put Small there, but I'm staying here. I'll keep the explosive gun in readiness, just in case."

Anthony nodded, and said, "All right, then. Here I go."

He opened the door and stepped out. At the faint sound the door made, the scratching at the shutter stopped. A second later, something seemed to flash through the air and throw itself at Anthony's face. Anthony, startled, didn't pull the trigger. Instead, he swung the gun upward and caught the creature in the middle, throwing it above the roof. As it rose high, he aimed, giving it a wide beam. The creature split in two and the pieces fell to the ground, where they wriggled spasmodically.

THE THING had possessed a long snake's head and neck on a small pseudo-mammalian body. Anthony's shot had cut it at the base of the neck, and as the eyes glared at him, he fired into the head. But even with the head shattered, the neck continued to twitch.

Alice shuddered. "How did it fly?"

"Get a little closer, and you'll see for yourself."

She managed to overcome her repulsion and approached close, still holding her own gun in readiness. And then, as Anthony had said, she saw for herself. All along the neck were small pairs of wings, and on the body two pairs of large ones. They were folded now, but their nature was clearly visible. As if to leave her in no doubt whatever, during one of the twitches a pair on the body shuddered open, and revealed a five-foot wingspread before it closed again.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Let's get into the house before we talk," replied Anthony, and they withdrew quickly and were about to bolt the door once more.

At that moment, Alice looked around and screamed. "Small!"

Anthony opened the door again, to find that Small had slipped out and was poking with interest in his mind and a stick in his hand at the body-half of the shattered

animal. Anthony grabbed him and carried him in. When they had bolted the door again, Alice fell into a chair. "That child gives me heart-failure a dozen times a day."

"That's what kids are for," said Anthony. "About that thing I killed—I've heard of them, but I've never seen one before. I hope they don't turn out to be common around here."

"If one finally found its way to us, others will, sooner or later."

"I'm afraid so," he sighed. "They're known as 'snaffles'—flying snakes. It may make you feel better to learn that they're not poisonous."

"It doesn't make me feel better in the least. They're horrible anyway."

"Well, how about getting a dog?"

"Send away for one—at once. Any kind, so long as it will kill these terrible things."

They sent away, and then they waited. A week later, Anthony killed a badgerine—a vicious, burrowing animal that had the habit of slaughtering for the pure joy of killing. The same day, a report came from T. I. Tapling to the effect that the Central Terrestrial Dog Breeding Station had reported an order for one of their animals, and that, by virtue of the fact that all orders for Government personnel on Government projects must be routed through Government channels, the order had been turned over to Mr. Tapling. However, as Mr. Tapling was strongly opposed to red tape—so said Mr. Tapling, black on white—he would not return a new blank order form to Mr. Anthony Kidd, but would save time, according to the procedure permitted by Regulation MN37VX25, Code 2, and fill out the necessary form himself.

"Why, the guy's human," said Anthony in surprise.

"Maybe he had a dog himself once," suggested Alice.

"Whatever it is, it shouldn't be long now."

But Mr. Tapling, as an expeditor, was not quite as efficient as when he played the role of obstructor. Another week passed, during which Anthony killed another oterocap and two snaffles, incurring a slight wound from one of the latter. The



wound showed signs, at first, of festering badly, and special biostatic treatment was needed to keep it from getting worse. The week after that, Anthony shot a new animal which he had never even heard described before. It seemed a baggy formless mass, with a tiny, almost invisible head. He tossed it aside, and the other animals, enticed by the meal, came to eat it and then prowl, audibly drooling, around the house. He shot several more, and still no dog.

He spent part of his hard-earned salary for a special cable to Mr. Tapling, and that gentleman, in his hatred of red tape, referred the message to a subordinate, who passed it on for action to a subordinate of his own. Anthony never heard of the cable again.

**D**URING the next week he killed no less than five different animals. Alice herself killed a snaffle which tried to get into the house through an imperfectly-barred window. The explosive gun was a great success, blowing head and most of the neck to bits with one shot, and knocking Alice to the floor at the same time by means of the recoil. She was bruised for days, and from that moment she lived in almost as great terror of the gun itself as of the animals outside.

In the month that followed, Anthony sent a cable each week, and received no reply to any of them. The number of animals that prowled around the house increased almost daily. There came the day when Alice called up the mine in panic.

"Anthony, there are *three* of them outside the house, all at once. One at the door, two at different shutters. Rush home! And bring help!"

"Okay," said Anthony, and rushed.

This time he was accompanied by one of his fellow engineers, who was carrying a surprise for Alice. The first surprise, however, was the one that Anthony himself received. Tunneling under the concrete foundation of the house was a badgerine whose presence Alice had not even suspected. But Anthony had no time to tackle it, for the other animals were quickly upon him. The first to arrive were the snaffles, and both Anthony and the en-

gineer with him aimed and shot in a hurry. Anthony's target fell apart as scheduled. The engineer's kept on coming, but fortunately overshot its mark, for its intended victim had fallen to the ground.

Anthony swung his gun around, knocked the snaffle into the air, and fired right into the middle of an oterocap rushing at him. It fell to the ground, eight heads howling, and then managed to lift itself and spring. But by this time the engineer was on his feet again, and while he broke its back with a blow of his own gun, Anthony disposed of the remaining snaffle.

It was only then that they heard the shriek from inside. The badgerine was cutting through the concrete and getting into the house. Anthony rushed to the door. It was bolted; and Alice, terrified as she watched the floor give way, either didn't hear his yells or was unable to get to him. Anthony wasted no time in pounding at the closed door. He rushed to the hole the badgerine had dug and crawled down after it.

The hole was dark, but fortunately fairly wide, as the badgerine was a large animal. Anthony was able to pull himself along at a fair rate of speed. While he was still a dozen feet from the concrete, he heard the explosive gun go off. He almost felt the shock that must have hit Alice, and tried to crawl faster, but only scraped his face against the rock. Actually, it was only a few seconds before he reached the concrete and dragged himself through, but it seemed like hours.

Alice had turned on the brightest lights, and, thoroughly shaken by the recoil, was now trying to aim with an unsteady gun at the badgerine, which had pulled itself together as if gathering strength to spring at her. The explosion had torn a hole in its side, and blood was staining the floor—but it wasn't the wound that had saved Alice from its first attempt to pounce upon her. It was the bright light, which dazzled the eyes so well adjusted to the black of the tunnel. It had leaped by odor and missed, and Alice had been cool enough to hold her fire until she could aim. But this time the animal would not miss.

It sprang, in fact, just as Anthony drag-

ged his own gun to aiming position, and its teeth were about to close on her throat when his blast drilled it through the primary heart. Even as it fell, it knocked her down.

ANTHONY kicked the animal aside and picked up his wife, who had fainted. Outside, the man who had accompanied him was pounding on the door. From behind the bolted door of the inner room, Small was wailing.

Anthony deposited his wife gently on a sofa, and let his friend in. The man said bitterly, "That Idiot Tapling."

"Never mind Tapling. Let me have your flask."

But Alice didn't need the whisky to revive. She opened her eyes just as Anthony lifted her again, and then, as her gaze met his own, she sighed. "What a wonderful man I married. Always just in time."

"That Idiot Tapling," growled the newcomer.

Alice looked at him questioningly, and Anthony said, "This is Carl Dowley. From the mines. He came along when I told him that I might need help. And look at what he has."

"A new gun!" exclaimed Alice.

"That's what it looks like," said Dowley. "From surplus, courtesy of Regulation ND7-25. And that's exactly what it isn't." He said to Anthony, "You saw me aim and fire. But you didn't see anything happen. Because it didn't go off."

"Let me take a look at it." Anthony opened it up, and stared. "No loader, no radiation shield, no charge chamber—the guts are missing!"

They looked at each other, and all three said, at the same moment, almost as if they had rehearsed it, "That Idiot Tapling!"

It was only then that Alice heard Small's wailing and opened the inner door.

They had thought that day was bad enough. The next day topped it.

The hole the badgerine had dug had been filled with quick-setting concrete and had no further attraction for animal visitors. Late in the afternoon, however, something came to the door, and Alice tried to phone the mine. But the line was dead, and she

3—Planet Stories—July

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realized that some animal, probably another badgerine, had cut through the concrete and metal shield that protected the phone and visor wires. She was not seriously upset, however—not then. She simply switched to the radio sender, and tried to contact the mine along her private wave-length. It was only when she realized that the power was not on that panic really gripped her.

The creature at the door kept working steadily, as if unaware that a half hour after its arrival a competitor had arrived at one of the shutters, and that a pretty race was on to see which would get Alice as its prey. She stared at her watch and tried to guess when Anthony would be coming home. Probably, as far as she could estimate, a half hour after the first creature had reached her. She might stop it with the explosive gun, and she might not. And then, if another showed up at the same window or door, while she was still unsteady from the recoil . . .

Her only hope was that they would come after her one by one, not too close together. She considered seriously the possibility of opening the shutter to allow the entrance of the snaffle which she was sure was tearing at it, getting rid of that, and then closing the shutter again while she recovered her steadiness. But she knew that the thing might come at her faster than she could handle it, and decided to leave the shutter alone.

For another half hour the animals worked away, each intent upon its own means of arriving at the victim. Then, for the first time, Alice heard the sound of a struggle between animals outside the house. The scratching at the shutter stopped, there came a thin shriek, a crash against the side, and then silence except for the vibration of the shutter.

The scratching at the door stopped next. This time there came the howling of octerocap heads, and then a crash high up, as if the creature had been hurled with great force against the house. The thing that had hurled it next pounded on the door, and to her horror Alice saw the door yield at the same time both at the bottom and at the top, as if it had been hit by both head and foot at once. Never

before had any animal been large enough to accomplish such a feat. This must be a predator of a new type, huger and stronger than the others.

For the second time in two days, Alice fainted.

**S**HE WAS AWAKENED a little later by a great pounding on the door. At first she thought she would faint again, but the unexpected sound of Anthony's voice reassured her. He was yelling to her to open up.

She lifted the bolt, and Anthony stepped toward her. As she fell forward to fling her arms around his neck, however, she caught sight of something over his shoulder . . . she closed her eyes and shrieked.

"Take it easy," said Anthony. "He may look frightening, but he's of a breed that's been trained to be gentle with humans."

"It's—"

"It's the thing that smashed the snaffle and trampled the octerocap. It's the dog they sent us."

She drew back, and a monster stepped into the room, its clumsy gait almost knocking the door off its hinges. It gazed at her with saucer eyes, and then, as Small came toward it, his own little eyes wide with a puzzled sort of delight, the dog stretched out a tongue bigger than Small's head and tried to lick Small's face. The boy fell over backward, squalling in fright.

"No, Rover!" said Anthony sternly.

The dog hung its head in shame.

"Down, Rover!"

The dog stood motionless, Anthony smacked him on the rear. The dog squatted down on his haunches, his head somewhere near the ceiling.

"See how gentle he is? He may look like a monster, but he wouldn't lay a paw or a tooth on a human being. They breed his kind for gentleness."

"But—are you sure it's a dog? How—why didn't you—"

"I tried to call you late this afternoon, when he arrived," said Anthony reasonably, "but the wire was cut. And your radio wasn't receiving. So I set out to walk him home. Had him on a leash. Not that I could hold him if he really tried to pull

away, but he won't exert his full force against a human who has him on a leash."

"Then how *did* he get away? If he killed the oterocap and the snaffle, he must have got here before you."

"He did. Fact is, I was careless," confessed Anthony shamefacedly. "I stopped to light a cigaret, and he tugged the leash out of my hand before I could get a good grip on it. He headed for this place because it was the only human-looking habitation in the neighborhood. Good thing, too. He got here in time to take care of those creatures."

Alice stared at the monster. "Good heavens, how big is he, anyway?"

"Seven feet at the shoulder, and weighs 2000 pounds. No wonder he could handle those animals, even though he is a pup."

"*A pup!*"

"Four months old. Two months when they shipped him out. It seems that the catalogue That Idiot Tapling sent us is a little out of date. In the past few centuries they've bred new kinds of dogs, entirely different from those they used to have on Earth. They've got them small enough to fit into a thimble, and big enough—well, as big as this one will be. Naturally, when we wrote away and asked for a protector type, one of the biggest they had, we didn't have any idea that they'd developed this. If Tapling had only sent us a modern catalogue—"

"I like him," announced Small suddenly. "Is his name Rover?"

"Absolutely."

"Will he knock me over again?"

"Of course not. That was just an accident."

"Are we going to keep him?"

Anthony looked at Alice and grinned. "I don't think we have any choice in the matter. It's a question of life and death."

"But not in the house," said Alice. "There's no room for him in the house. And he'll be quite safe outside."

"I'm afraid not," said Anthony. "He's strong, but as a pup he's still delicate. Very susceptible to virus infections."

"That elephant?" exclaimed Alice in-

credulously. "Afraid of little things like viruses?"

Anthony nodded. "His kind catch cold very easily. After he grows older, of course, he'll be different. He'll be able to sleep outside, if you make him a chest protector. The chest has to stay warm. You used to knit well, Alice."

"I can't knit a chest protector for an elephant!"

"You're exaggerating. Even full-grown, he probably won't top 4600 pounds. Some elephants come a lot bigger than that."

"I'll sew him a protector out of an old blanket. I won't knit it."

"I guess that will do. Meanwhile, as I said, we'll have to keep him in the house. And about food—" He coughed delicately. "Later on, he'll be able to supply himself. Meanwhile, he's still a pup, as I must keep on reminding you. We'll have to buy special dogfood. And vitamin concentrates. A few gallons a year, no more. He'll be mature at about two."

Alice groaned. "He probably saved my life, but I can't help it, Anthony, I can't welcome him like the guest he should be. Either he'll eat us out of house and home, or he'll crowd us out—"

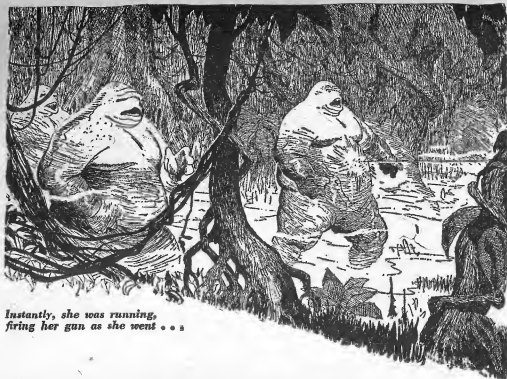
"I can take him back or give him to someone else," observed Anthony. "I already have an offer."

"No—I'm afraid we need him too much." She looked at the animal grimly, and said, "You win, Rover. You're one of the family."

Rover bent his head, and Anthony scratched it. Small said, "Daddy, could he give me a ride?" and Anthony put the boy on the dog's back, and watched him parade clumsily around the room, knocking over no more than two chairs. A moment later, the boy slipped off, beaming.

"I think it'll work out," said Anthony.

As if in answer, Small's eyes seemed to pop out of his head, while his finger pointed. Alice shrieked, and in her voice there was the expression of stark tragedy such as Aristotle had never known, of the ultimate outrage of a malignant and remorseless fate: "*He isn't housebroken!*"



*Instantly, she was running,  
firing her gun as she went . . .*

# ◀ VENUS MISSION ▶

A NOVELET

by J. T. M'INTOSH

**T**HE CRIPPLED SHIP SCREAM-  
ed down toward Venus, upright, in  
a slow axial spin, riding silent jets.  
Grey cloud curved sleekly past the fins,  
streamed up in trembling ribbons along  
the shining sides. At the noseport, War-  
ren Blackwell strained his eyes in an ef-  
fort to pierce that boiling greyness, but he  
knew the Venusian atmosphere, knew he  
was wasting his time. He would see the  
ground when the ship was fifty feet above  
it, and that would be far too late.

The door of the control room clicked,  
and the girl who sat at the other end of  
the table from him at meal-times entered  
and came up to him.

"The captain sent me, in case I could

help," she said.

"And to get you out of the way."

She grinned without humor. "No  
doubt."

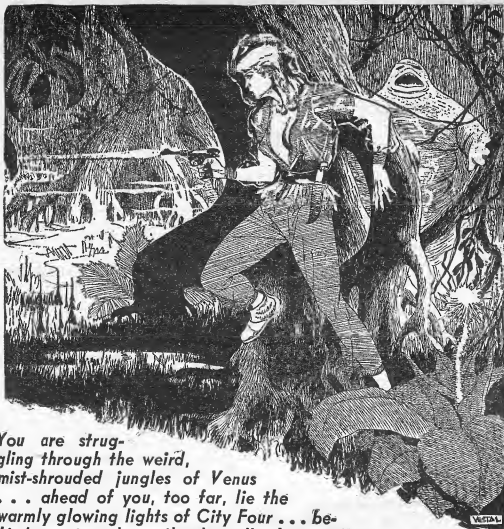
"What's your name?" he asked.

"Virginia Stuart. You might as well call  
me Virginia. There's not much time left  
for formality, is there. . . . You're Black-  
well, aren't you—the Blackwell?"

"If you mean the one who won all the  
medals, yes. How many are there left?"

"Of the crew? The captain and his sec-  
ond officer. And the captain's weaving  
about a bit. It won't be long before the  
radiation gets him too."

Warren surveyed her and decided she  
could take the truth. "Go back and get one



**You are struggling through the weird, mist-shrouded jungles of Venus . . . ahead of you, too far, lie the warmly glowing lights of City Four . . . behind you, too close, silently stalks the most terrible Death in the System!**

of them out," he told her. "It'll only need one to jam on all the power there is left when I ring for it. But there must be one. It isn't much of a chance, but it's the only one we've got."

"Check," she said. "Isn't the phone working?"

"No. Only the alarm."

**S**HE NODDED, and left him. Warren strained again to pierce the grey cloud. He was a passenger on the *Merkland*, but he had been co-opted when the power-leak developed. He knew more than any of the crew about Venus. Not that that made much difference. All that he could do was

stay where he was and sound the alarm when he saw the ground. Then, down below, whoever was left would touch off the braking jets, and with luck the ship would come down hard but in one piece. But it would need a lot of luck.

There wouldn't be much hope for any one who was below. Warren, right in the nose, probably stood the best chance, after the rest of the passengers, who were locked in a store-room amidships. None of the other passengers would have been much help, and apparently the captain had picked out him and the girl as the only ones who might be useful in the emergency. He seemed a brave and able officer,

that captain. He could have stayed in the nose himself, safe, if anyone was, and left the problem of the leaking radiation to someone else. But he knew that only he or some other member of his crew could handle the jets, and that it was vital that they should fire exactly when needed.

The girl came back, and Captain Morris was with her. "I make it twenty thousand feet up, Blackwell," said Morris. "Do you think that would be about right?"

Virginia hadn't exaggerated when she said the captain was weaving about a bit. He was in the last stages of plutonium poisoning. Warren thought, a trifle cynically, that the captain might as well go on being a hero now, for he was a dead man already. But Warren was used to death. The rows of ribbons somewhere in his luggage proclaimed that.

"I never flew much over Venus," he admitted. "Nobody does. I'd say we were well up yet, on a long slant. But don't quote me."

The captain sank heavily into one of the control seats. He could never stop his shaking now, but he could limit it by trying to relax. "We can blast for five seconds, I make it," he said. "That means at our speed we should start a hundred and twenty feet up."

Warren shook his head. "You might see a hundred and twenty feet on the surface. But not straight down. It's thickest about sixty feet up."

"That's why I came to see you. We're in your hands, Blackwell. You know more about these currents than anyone else on board. You'll have to guess, that's all. The instruments aren't anywhere near that precise, and if you wait till you see solid ground it'll be too late. Someone has to guess. It might as well be you."

Warren nodded. Morris hoisted himself to his feet. He paused at the door. "Goodbye," he said.

Warren was left with the girl. "Now you've got a chance to win another medal," she said.

"I could live without it. When the Venusian war was over I thought I'd finished with danger."

"You're never finished with danger. It follows a brave man around."

"Maybe," murmured Warren, "but I'm not a brave man. Never was."

HER EYES WIDENED, but she said nothing. She had never met Warren Blackwell before this trip. In fact, she hadn't officially met him *on* the trip, until she introduced herself a few minutes before. But like everyone else, she had read of him while the war was on. A man who treated his life as a millionaire might treat a dime he found in his shoe. It wasn't that he was lucky, or so clever that the dangers were always less real than they seemed. He had been wounded scores of times and captured twice. And no one else had escaped from the Greys even once. He would drop out of the news for a couple of months while he was recovering from injury. Then he would be back with some new exploit that made it seem he was determined to get himself killed.

Was that it? she wondered, looking at him as he peered through the big quartz windows. Had he cared so little for life that his courage had really been resignation? She had read that he had come from an orphanage, even a hint that he had been in a reform school. But details like that weren't publicized about a hero.

It wasn't that, she decided. The man beside her was passionately fond of life. She could see it in the way his whole body concentrated on the job in hand. He wasn't trying to save her and the others. If that had been the case he would have been cold and steady. He was trying to save himself—and the rest of them as a sort of afterthought.

He shook himself suddenly and turned from the window. "It'll be a few minutes yet," he said, "and if I watch much longer I'll get jumpy and ring for the jets too soon. You wouldn't like to do a strip act to pass the time?"

"That's not at all funny," she said coolly. He watched her broodingly and saw she thought less of him than she had a moment before. It was that easy to lose admiration and respect.

She was a tough-looking girl, workmanlike rather than pretty. But she was sufficiently versatile to make herself attractive too, for no more reason, perhaps, than

that of the man who doesn't intend to go out or see anyone but still shaves and brushes his hair. She wore dark slacks and a heavy blue shirt, and though her outfit didn't suggest any particular beauty of figure, it didn't absolutely deny it. She had light brown hair and a strong, young face. The features were good, and if they were too full of character for beauty, they were just right for a certain subtle elegance. It was a pity to see a woman like that die. There weren't too many of them.

"What do you do?" he asked.

"I've done a lot of things. At the moment I'm on Government work."

"Which government?"

"UNO. There's nothing secret about it. I'm . . ."

She broke off as Warren turned back to the window. "I'm beginning to get a feeling about this," he murmured. "We should be somewhere over the Norman Forest. But we were slanting a long time. I think we almost hit an orbit. Maybe we overshot to the Norman Hills. In which case—" his voice sank to nothing—"I should sound the alarm *now!*"

Virginia wasn't prepared. Her eyes darted to Warren's hand, pressing hard down on the button, then flashed to the window, where there was a sudden break in the grey mist, a blinding flash, and a glimpse of a whirling black mass outside as the floor kicked up at her. She realized that by luck or divination Warren had picked on the right split-second.

**T**HE CRASH dazed her, but she never lost consciousness. Warren did. She saw him shoot forward toward the window and caught him by one ankle. She didn't stop him, but he crashed against the quartz with less force. Virginia heard a scream of metal on stone that mounted until her ears refused to take it, and told her nothing more.

Then gradually she realized that the ship was down, probably as safely as it could have been. She looked out, but there was nothing but grey mist and black soil. She had been on Venus before, but never out in the open, only in the domed cities. Nevertheless, she knew it was full

day. There was about as much light as on a misty moonlit night on Earth, and visibility was about forty yards, which was as light as it ever was on Venus.

Warren was stirring. He wakened as she expected him to waken, quietly, doing nothing until he had had a look around. "You stopped me crashing through the window," he said. "I'll do something for you sometime."

"You've done it. You got us down."

He rose unsteadily. "We'd better let the others out," he said.

By tacit agreement they looked for the captain first. But he, the second officer, and any other members of the crew who hadn't actually been dead before the landing were crushed in a flat envelope of steel which had once been the drive room. They couldn't get near them, which was perhaps just as well. They made their way to the store-room and unlocked the door.

It hadn't been a bad landing, in the circumstances. There had been fifteen people in the room, and seven of them were still alive, though two would never recover consciousness. As it happened, they would have been safer in the nose with Warren and Virginia, but no one could have known that.

Warren took stock of them, ignoring the moans and screams. He ignored the dead too. If they were dead, it didn't matter whether they were unmarked or a disgusting pulp. It was the living who mattered. Waters, the actor, was bleeding from mouth and ears in a way that showed he was still alive. His wife was breathing, which was rather horrible, for her neck was obviously broken.

**T**HE OTHER FIVE were almost unhurt. Fortunately the doctor, Williamson, was on his feet and looked sane and well. Standing beside him, apparently only dazed, was old Martin, who was ninety and had come through the crash as well as anyone. Three others were stirring on the floor, and Smith, with a broken wrist, seemed to be the most seriously injured, though it was the women who were doing most of the screaming and moaning.

Mrs. Martin could hardly be blamed,



for like most of those in the room she had lost some of her clothes in a blast of air which must have swept the room, and was probably screaming more at finding herself half-naked in company at the age of seventy-five than anything else. But the Glamour Girl, whose name Warren didn't know, was screaming only because she always screamed when anything happened. Warren had met girls like her before, and had not been impressed.

At the evidence of a blast of air Warren looked round quickly and sniffed. But the ship was airtight. There was no hiss of escaping air, and the pressure was high—too high, if anything. Perhaps there had been a rift which had immediately been sealed by the weight and momentum of the ship. There were cracks and holes in the inner walls, but they were not as strong as the hull.

"All right, doctor?" he asked. "You take over."

"Doesn't look as if there's much I can do," said Williamson wryly.

"Don't be modest," Warren said. The doctor stared blankly, and Virginia shot a quick glance at Warren. He had gone down in her estimation again, he decided.

Glamour was tugging at his lapel and screaming: "Get me out of here! Get me out!"

"Into the open?" he asked coolly. "You'd die in eight hours. But long before that the Greys would have got you."

She hadn't heard him. She was still screaming, "Get me out of here!" Her dress had a spectacular plunging neckline as if rent open by the blast, but it was natural. Her hair wasn't even dishevelled. She was completely unmarked and very beautiful, which was a pity, Warren thought, for she didn't deserve to be. Better people had died in the crash.

Virginia pulled her gently away from him. "You said something about the Norman Hills. Do you know where we are?"

"It's only a guess," he admitted, "but I think I do. Almost exactly, if I'm anywhere near right at all."

"How's that?"

"We're lying up a bare slope, on soft soil. But we hit rock first, and if we came down roughly straight we just missed

the forest. That puts us somewhere on a narrow belt twenty to thirty miles from City Four—Cefor for short."

"And how are our chances?"

He looked round at the others, now silent and hanging on his words, even Glamour and Mrs. Martin, whose husband had wrapped her in his jacket. There was no point in letting it out slowly. Might as well get it over with.

"Our chances must be better now than they were when we were coming down," he said deliberately. "But you'd need a slide-rule and a lot of figures to prove it."

THERE was a moment's silence while they worked out his meaning. Then Glamour threw herself at him, screaming and scratching at his face, as though he personally were responsible for their plight.

Virginia seized his arm as he was fending Glamour off, none too gently, and pulled him away. "Let's go and check up," she said. He grinned. Her opinion of him might be dropping, and would probably drop more very soon, but after all he was the only one with whom she could talk seriously. The safety of them all depended on him and her.

She led him back to the observation room.

"It can't be as bad as you made out," she said.

"Why not?"

"Surely they must have seen us come down. There's bound to be a search. Or at worst, surely one of us can get through if it's only twenty miles."

"I'm not just deliberately being pessimistic," he said. "I want to live too. But let's take it from the beginning. The captain would corroborate if he were here. One, they couldn't see us in Cefor. We didn't come over it, we were pointing roughly toward it. And they couldn't see a flaming meteor at five miles, let alone us at twenty. Radar doesn't work in this soup any more than in water. And a seismograph wouldn't help because there are so many quakes on Venus no one will be even interested in the shock we made on landing."

"Two, we were bound for New Paris

"in the other hemisphere of Venus, and when a search starts in about twenty-four hours from now they'll concentrate around there first. At a rough guess it will be six months before they find this ship. Remember, they've got to explore almost every inch of ground. A helicopter has to be within a stonethrow before it can see us."

The girl stared. "But any time there's a forced landing the passengers are picked up before there's any real danger—even if the ship is breached and they have to breathe that poison outside. I always thought the only danger was getting down safely."

"Yes," said Warren gently, "usually. But usually the radio doesn't crack up first—before the ship. Ours did. So no one knows where we are."

"Oh. I see. But we can't wait six months. We'll all be dead in a week. They don't carry much in the way of stores on these ships."

He nodded. "That's about the size of it."

She shrugged. "Well, we just have to get on the way to Cefor, then."

"Not me. If I'm going to die, I'll die here."

She shot a puzzled glance at him. "I don't understand you. You used to be a hero. You've done harder things than this trek to Cefor. You got medals for it."

**H**E SMILED BLEAKLY. "No, you don't understand. I told you I was no hero. Before the war I was nothing, nobody. I'd tried a few things and failed in them all. I tried crime two or three times, and failed in that too. When the war started I realized it was my last chance. In peace I had nothing to look forward to but starvation or jail. So I thought I'd buy me a job. I became a professional hero. I didn't give a damn if I died. But if I got through I was pretty sure of some sort of job. Civilians aren't grateful for long, but a collection of every medal they mint ought to be a recommendation just after the war, I thought. And I was right. I had my choice of jobs. I joined an importing firm and I've done well."

"I was a hero once, but that was when I had to risk my life to buy a life worth living. I bought it and paid for it. But when you gamble like that, you do it only once. I'm not going to throw away all I worked for trying to get through to Cefor. Sure, I know the Greys. I beat them before. But that was then. Now I'd rather stay here and take my chance of being rescued than give them another crack at me."

She looked steadily at him for a long time. Then she shook her head. "Maybe I'm wrong to say it," she murmured, "but you weren't twisted before. You're only twisted now. You've gone soft."

"Sure I've gone soft. I risked my life time and again so that one day I'd have a chance to go soft."

"Well, if you won't go, I must."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Please yourself."

She made a gesture of disgust. "Heaven knows I never thought I'd appeal to chivalry. I never cried off or made excuses because I'm a woman. But—"

"It doesn't matter. The Greys will get whoever tries it."

"I thought the war was over."

"Sure it is. But out there you won't find the civilized Greys. The Greys who will get you never signed any treaty. They won't attack the cities, but they'll attack anything or anyone outside."

She turned to the closet that contained the oxygen suits. "I might as well go now."

Warren watched her as she shook out the plastic envelope, obviously unfamiliar to her, and tried to climb into it. Then he put his hand on her arm.

"I can't let you go without telling you exactly why you shouldn't," he said.

She shook his arm off and struggled with the suit.

"First of all, though it's only a detail," he remarked, "you don't wear heavy clothes under that. You'd sweat off pounds before you'd gone a hundred yards. Most of us used to wear nothing but the suit, but if you don't like that, wear something light and loose."

She began to take off the suit again. "You'll have no difficulty in finding the city" he said. "It's right up the hill. Keep

on the incline and you can't go wrong. If you have to make a detour, just get back on the slope as soon as you can."

He paused. "You'll have even less difficulty in finding the Greys."

**S**HE WAITED for him to go on, hating him but utterly dependent on his knowledge of Venus.

"No native Venusians have any sense of smell," he said. "So to replace scent in hunting they have a sense that feels thought."

He saw her start, and grinned. "They can locate anything that thinks. They're not telepaths. They don't know what you think, any more than dogs hearing voices know what's being said. They just know there's thinking going on in such-and-such a direction, and from the kind of thinking they know the kind of creature that's doing it. So it doesn't matter what you think about, they'll pick you up."

He smiled again, cruelly, she thought. "When they do find you, they won't kill you right away. They'll follow you and let you catch a glimpse of one of them now and then and harry you and frighten you half to death. But they'll let you get right to the gates of Cefor. Ever seen a cat torturing a mouse? The Greys are just like that. At the very last minute, when you think you're safe, they'll drag you off into the forest and torture you to death. Maybe they'll let you escape two or three times. But at last they'll tire."

She twisted from him angrily, certain she had heard all that would be of any use to her. She left the room to go to her cabin and change her clothes. But as silently as a cat he had followed her.

"Listen carefully to what happens then," he said, "for it's very important."

She tried to pass him, but he leaned with one arm on either side of her, holding her against the wall.

"They won't let you die. They'll mutilate you with their knives so that you're bound to die, so that the best doctors on Earth, Venus and Mars couldn't save you, so that you're in agony but will still live quite a while. Then they'll take you to the nearest city—in this case, Cefor. They'll leave you there. It amuses them

that we humans don't kill our own people, even when they want to die. You'll die in a hospital bed, heavily drugged but still not enough to stop all the pain."

He let her go, for she was listening again, in horrified fascination. "But that isn't important," he said casually. "What is important is that you can tell them about us. We'll all be grateful to you. We may erect a statue to you. You'll die, but in dying you can save us."

He turned and left her then. She stared after him in horror, her horror for the Greys a little less strong than her horror for him.

**W**ARREN WAS WAITING at the airlock as she came back. He grinned at her. She was almost literally sick. The worst of it was that he was almost certainly right. She had to make the effort, as no one else would make it. He knew that. He could afford to let her do it. And he would be saved. She would tell them at Cefor about the ship. He wasn't alone. There were other lives to be saved.

Warren surveyed her and nodded. "You're all right," he said. "Can you use a gun?"

She nodded involuntarily. "Take another," he said. "They won't give you time to reload." He gave her a gun, which she slipped in her belt. She had changed into lounging pajamas which were enveloping but so thin she shivered in the normal temperature of the ship. Over them the plastic suit covered her loosely, completely, held firmly by the belt that contained her weapons.

Unwillingly she addressed him. "Is there *no* way of screening thoughts from the Greys?"

"Only by thinking like a Grey yourself. Only about half a dozen people ever learned to do it—and they can't keep it up for long."

She fought a shrieking urge in her to beg him to go instead of her. She believed all he had said—she expected to die. But she also believed that if she stayed where she was, she would die. No one else would go.

"Good luck," said Warren.

Blindly, insanely she struck at him. But

he evaded her blow and helped her into the airlock.

When she went out, the heat met her as if an oven door had been swung open. The ship's hull was insulated against both cold and heat. Usually it was cold it kept out, but on Venus it was damp warmth. Virginia's suit was supposed to afford some sort of insulation, but before she was out of sight of the ship she was wet all over with sweat.

She took one last look at the ship as she climbed up the slope. It was only fifty yards away. She could still turn and go back. She was beginning to realize something that stemmed from what Warren had said. She could always find Cefor—but she couldn't find the ship again once she lost sight of it. Going downhill might land her anywhere along the perimeter once she had lost all sense of direction—which would be almost at once.

She tried to think calmly of Warren. He must have known from the first that if he wouldn't try to get through to Cefor, she would. She wasn't the sort to sit still and wait for death.

And the savage, inhuman customs of the Greys ensured that only one had to go. Hate for Warren crawled in her stomach. The worst of it was, she believed he might have got through safe. She still believed in his competence. Somehow, if he had had to, he would have reached safety.

But he didn't have to risk it. There was someone to risk it for him. A girl, but that didn't matter to a man who had lost pride.

She walked on for what seemed hours, until she was as wet as if she had just stepped out of a hot bath. Her watch showed sixty-three minutes since she left the ship. She had been walking briskly. Over four miles. She had always been a good walker, and the slighter gravity helped.

Then she struck the forest, beginning again on the slope. Venusian trees were like those of Earth in that they consisted mainly of a thick trunk, but that was all the resemblance. You could push an arm through them, and they closed round it. But they weren't dangerous. A man could

walk right through them, if he was strong.

Virginia began to hope, despite herself, that she wouldn't see any Greys. She fell into the rhythm of her stride, walking like an automaton. She was tough. She could do twenty miles without coming to the end of her strength. The only difficulty was the eternal slope. But even that she became accustomed to.

She had done ten miles, she reckoned, when ahead of her, right in her path, she saw a Grey. He was facing her, only twenty yards away. Her gun came up and she fired, but she was not surprised when he faded into the mist and disappeared, unharmed.

**SO IT HAD STARTED.** There would be a lot of this, according to Warren. The Greys were humanoid, like half-finished men. They had no hair, but they had arms, legs, feet, a trunk and a head. Everything about them was rounded off—shoulders, thighs, feet. They were a uniform grey all over, and invisible on their own planet at anything more than twenty yards. They could be in plain sight, and only had to turn or move back a step to disappear completely.

She began to plan. Perhaps she could beat them, on what Warren had told her. Nothing mattered, apparently, until she was almost at Cefor. She would have to save herself till then. Greys could run a little faster than most humans, but not much. And she used to be able to do the hundred yards in well under twelve seconds. Civilized Greys had civilized weapons, but these were probably unarmed except for knives. If she could pick her time right for a dash to the city, she might make it.

She began to reel a little and slowed her pace, knowing she was observed. Perhaps she might trick them into leaving the final attack till too late. She could rest a little now. It was only the last mile that mattered.

She staggered and fell. She rose slowly, in artistic fatigue. But she almost jerked into her sprint when she saw four Greys calmly watching her from only ten yards.

She shot rapidly, and one of them fell. The others didn't appear to care. But

they disappeared, if only just beyond her range of vision.

She ran a little then, in terror that was only a little less real than she pretended. But the control she still had on herself enabled her to stumble on tiredly at hardly more than walking pace.

Her hopes were beginning to rise. Twelve miles; she was still fresh; and the Greys must think her almost out on her feet. They must let her see Cefor or their devilish torture wouldn't be complete. And if they let her get that far, she might be able to dash for the gates and then hold them off until men came out, attracted by her shots.

She pondered over firing early in the hope that she would give the alarm. But almost certainly that would precipitate the Greys' attack, and she wanted to trick them into leaving it until the last possible moment.

Suddenly something crashed between her legs, throwing her headlong. She wasn't hurt, but when she got up she limped. They were playing into her hands. Warren had done this, she thought. Twice he had escaped from the Greys. And perhaps he hadn't known as much as she did now.

They left her alone for quite a while. She saw nothing of them for so long that she almost began to hope that they had tired and left her alone. But she kept her slow pace. They might be trying to trick her into showing she was stronger than she pretended.

When she least expected it she was bowled over from behind and felt the touch of warm, moist skin. She gave herself up to terror and thought, *This is it*. But they only rolled her about gently, played with her, and tripped her again every time she rose. There seemed to be about a dozen of them. She was afraid to try to shoot them. Her guns were secure if she left them where they were, but if she drew one they might knock it from her hand.

At last they were gone. They had torn her suit, but only the pantaloons part. She was puzzled, then realized why. Without oxygen she would die in eight hours, and would be beyond recovery in six. They

knew that, and they wanted her to live longer.

**S**HE CUT HER SUIT away at the waist, below her belt. It left her legs freer. Her thin slacks clung to her legs so that by now they almost seemed a part of her. She wondered what they would do if she threw away the rest of the suit. Would they put it back on her forcibly?

She knew she must have done nearly twenty miles, and wished Warren had overestimated the distance. He had said twenty to thirty miles, and she had been unable to prevent herself hoping it was the smaller limit. But there was no sign of Cefor yet.

Two of them would have had a much better chance, she thought angrily. They could have watched all round them and kept the Greys more on the defensive. As it was, the Greys were so silent that a score of them could be walking only a few yards behind her. She resisted the temptation to look until she was set to do it quickly, ready to take a shot at anything she saw.

When she had swung round she wished she hadn't. At least a score of dark shapes faded rapidly into the fog. Now she would always know they were there behind her, within sight if she turned her head. It was enough to drive her mad.

The Greys could see only about thirty or forty yards—even less than she could. If the mist would only lift, she knew she could see them long before they could see her. But the mist never lifted. It was the atmosphere of the planet. There was a lot of oxygen in it, but there were other things in it too.

Suddenly she saw a faint glow ahead. She forced herself to be cold as ice. The bright lights of the domed city would carry a long way, even through the fog. It might be anything up to a mile distant yet, though probably not more than half a mile. This was the time Warren had warned her about. The time when she began to think she was through. She forced herself to stumble slowly on. She nursed a faint hope that as the Greys probably couldn't actually see the city yet, though they would know where it was,

they might leave her alone for a while yet.

She went staggering on, thinking over and over again, *Not yet! Not yet!* as her body rebelled and tried to run toward the light.

Then she saw the Greys closing in. Instantly she was running, firing her gun as she went. She didn't care where the bullets went. But she realized in rending disappointment that the mist blanketed sound as well as sight, and she was still too far away for the sound to be heard in Cefor.

But she was holding her lead! She went wild with exultation and threw her empty gun away. Even its weight held her back, and as she raced toward the light she told herself she had won. The Greys had underestimated her, as she had been inviting them to do for hours.

Suddenly she heard a scream behind her. A woman's scream. It was so unexpected that she checked her stride involuntarily. She took it up again at once. The scream was another of the Greys' tricks.

Then it came again, and there were words. It was no Grey she heard. Behind her, a human girl was screaming as she was dragged down. Again Virginia couldn't help checking her stride. But then, furious with herself, she renewed her efforts. It must be Yvonne Yonge who was screaming. Somehow, for some reason, the little glamour girl had set out after her. That was too bad. Virginia's duty to herself, to the rest of them, even to Yvonne, was to reach Cefor. She burst forward as if she had merely been trotting gently before.

But the Greys were at her heels. She never knew whether she would have escaped if Yvonne's scream hadn't checked her, or whether the Greys would have caught her anyway. Either way, they had her.

**S**HE FOUGHT as she had never known she could fight. As she had never known anyone could fight. If there had only been ten of them, even twenty, she might have broken free again and again, until at last she reached Cefor. But there

were scores of them, perhaps hundreds. When she broke from one group she was in the middle of another.

She stopped fighting at last, thinking she had no strength left. But when they began to drag her away from the lights of Cefor she found a reserve of strength that she hadn't known about. It made no difference.

She didn't see Yvonne, if it had been Yvonne. She was dragged for what seemed miles. The Greys were very gentle with her. They took all she was able to give them rather than scratch her skin. Now they folded her up at the foot of a tree, holding her so that she went down easily, naturally. Then they tied vines about her neck.

For a moment Virginia half hoped, half feared that they were going to throttle her. But instead they wound the rope about her throat, holding her plastic suit tight against her skin. Then they cut the suit neatly below the rope, fastened the plastic edge firmly against her skin with an adhesive binding, and removed the rope.

Obviously they wanted her to go on breathing through the filter in her hood, but to have the rest of her accessible. They reached over her and she flinched, expecting them to strip her, but they only tied her hands and ankles and patted her all over, making sure she had no concealed weapons.

Then they left her. In a moment there wasn't a Grey in sight.

She was helpless even to damage herself. She could roll on her side and rub her plastic hood on the ground in an effort to tear it and let the poisonous air reach her lungs—but that would take hours, and she didn't think she would be left alone that long.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," said Warren.

**H**ER HEAD jerked up, but she couldn't see him. Then, fantastically, his head appeared from the tree beside her. He was standing within it.

"Warren Blackwell!" she gasped. "You here!"

"I've never been more than a hundred

yards away since you left the ship," he said. "Sorry, Virginia, it was the only way it could be done. I've got the trick of thinking like a Grey. But it would never fool the Greys for hours at a time. They would sense the human thoughts—unless there was another human about, thinking like a human."

He grinned down at her. "I told you they couldn't read thoughts. That wasn't quite right. They can read emotions—like fear. And they would know if you expected to get through. They'd have wondered what you were counting on. Then they'd have found me."

"But . . ."

"They rely on this sense of theirs—just as dogs rely on scent rather than sight. They weren't likely to see me, and they didn't. And if that little fool Glamour hadn't interfered we'd both have got through. I meant to get just ahead of you. Then, when the Greys finally decided to take you, I'd have helped you to cut and shoot your way through."

"But Glamour spoiled it. God knows what she was trying to do. I told them all to stay where they were, that we'd get through. Maybe she thought it was easy and wanted some of the glory. Anyway, I didn't know about her until a few minutes ago. She was behind us both. And there were so many Greys between you and her, I had to hide."

"Well, don't waste time," said Virginia. "Cut me loose and we'll—"

"No can do. They'd pick you up again long before we got to Cefor—whether we looked for Glamour or left her here. And then they'd know about me. No, there's only one way. I'll have to wait until there's less of them between here and Cefor and then try to get through myself. I'll be back."

"Can you get through alone?"

"I think so. I'm safe so long as I'm near you. By the time they sense me it'll be too late. But listen, Virginia. If they sense us coming back—men from Cefor and I—they'll drag you and Glamour away and that'll be the end of you. You must keep them here."

"I?" She nodded at her bonds. "What do you expect me to do?"

"That's up to you." He paused; went on tensely. "They'll start torturing you soon. That will occupy them. They'll be too excited to know we're coming. Don't be noble. Let them start on that little fool. Don't try to escape. They might not bring you back here."

He grinned again. "I think I can start now. Good luck—again."

HE FADED AWAY into the mist. Virginia stared after him, though she could see nothing. If he had only told her . . . But she realized he probably told the truth when he said he hadn't dared. Knowing he was about, she would have been sure she would get through safely—though she had hated him, she had never doubted his competence—and then the Greys would have caught them both.

There was sound again in the silence of the mist. They were bringing in Yvonne—Glamour, as Warren called her. She was shouting, kicking, clawing. And the Greys weren't handling her as gently as they had handled Virginia. Perhaps they had some respect for courage, Virginia thought. She had never been in a blue funk as Yvonne was. Maybe it was because of that that they had been gentle with her.

And perhaps—she couldn't help thinking of it—perhaps they would work on Yvonne first.

It seemed like a dream—not a nightmare yet, for the Greys looked ludicrous rather than dangerous. There were hundreds of them. They filled the clearing; though Yvonne was only twenty yards away, she might have been a million miles for all that was visible of her. Virginia was lifted to her feet by what seemed like a hundred hot, wet Greys, and as they led her, still bound, to where she had last seen Yvonne the whole thing seemed more a practical joke than anything else.

Then abruptly it stopped being a practical joke.

They had cut Yvonne's suit like hers, leaving nothing but the hood over her head, fastened at the neck. Yvonne was wearing a blouse and shorts and looked like the heroine of a jungle picture. When

she saw Virginia she tried to get up to go to her.

But the Greys stopped that by pinning her to the ground with two knives through her hands. Her shriek went through Virginia's head like a needle.

Four of the Greys held Virginia so that she had to watch what was going on. She shut her eyes, but when Yvonne screamed again they had to come open.

If the Greys had shouted and danced and beat drums it would have been less horrible. But the only sounds were those forced from Yvonne. There were plenty of those.

To keep her sanity Virginia concentrated desperately on Warren, making his way toward Cefor. He needed time. Suddenly, after a long spell of relaxation, she flung herself forward, tore free and pitched beside Yvonne, who was still, she realized, only mildly hurt beside what was to come.

"Warren's gone for help," she murmured. "Hold out a little and he'll be back."

As the Greys dragged Virginia to her feet again Yvonne screamed wildly: "Why do you leave her alone? Why do you only torture me? I can't take any more. She can take it. She's strong. Please leave me alone. Please . . . *awhhhh!*"

She shrieked again as a Grey bent over her with a knife. She wasn't screaming now for nothing . . .

IT WAS ALMOST an hour later that they brought Warren in. It had seemed like days to Virginia and probably untold centuries to Yvonne. When she saw him being forced into the clearing by a mass of struggling Greys, Virginia stared in horror. She had always believed he would get through. The question had merely been whether he would be in time. He wouldn't look at her. He stared impassively at Yvonne instead.

They hadn't touched Virginia yet, beyond holding her still—but it must be close to her time. If they weren't going to let Yvonne die, they couldn't do much more to her. There was very little blood. The Greys had a herb that seemed to close the skin, though it left an angry purple discoloration. Yvonne was almost all purple.

For some time she had had no strength to scream. The Greys were losing interest in her. Further torture had no noticeable effect. She was conscious, but she didn't seem to feel fresh cuts.

They must have had some invisible means of communication among themselves. Suddenly, as if at a signal, they turned to Virginia, and with a sick feeling at her stomach she knew her time had come.

"I always wondered," said Warren curiously, "what kind of figure you had."

But, not being human, the Greys didn't strip her. They merely stretched her on the ground and cut her bonds, waiting for her to make a dash for it. That was part of the fun.

Suddenly Warren tore himself free. But instead of running from the clearing he threw himself at Virginia. "Play up," he panted. "They won't know what to do. They'll wait to see what happens. It will amuse them to see us fighting."

"Then you *did* get through?"

"Sure I got through. I said I would, didn't I? But we have to give them something to think about. So that they won't sense the men closing in. Fight, damn you. We're not out of the wood yet. If we give them time to think . . ."

His breath left him in a gasp as Virginia's hard fist sank into his stomach.

While the Greys watched they fought for their lives. But not against each other, though that was part of it. They didn't care if they were hurt. If the fight was too tame to excite the Greys they would be hurt much more. It meant nothing to the Greys that they were a man and a woman. The Greys were monogamous and had never quite worked out the relationship of human men and women.

Virginia's hood was torn, and she wondered if the Greys would stop the fight. From then on she was breathing poison. But it didn't matter. She would either be safe in six hours or as near dead as made no difference. She tore off the hood altogether and threw it from her, jerking her hair back out of her eyes.

Warren was grunting with pain more than her blows deserved. It did occur to Virginia once as he struck at her with feral



strength that perhaps he was hurting her more than he need; but then she realized that as the Greys sensed fear they probably sensed pain, and that that was at the root of their inhuman sadism. After that she didn't pull her punches either.

Then Warren, his fist drawn back to jab in her ribs, swung at the nearest Grey instead, knocked him spinning. The clearing was suddenly filled with men in tough plastic suits. They didn't use guns, but long knives. It was massacre, for the Greys' knives couldn't pierce their suits.

It was massacre, and Virginia gladly helped in it. The moist black ground ran with blood, and none of it was red. The Greys didn't run. Inflamed with bloodlust, they couldn't suddenly switch over to reason and to fear. They stood their ground and were cut to pieces.

**"W**ELL, now you know the Greys," said Warren.

They were in a room, a civilized room in a city again. There were deep carpets on the floor and soft couches and armchairs. Virginia had thrown herself in one of them, still in her black suit. Her jacket was little more than a collar, there wasn't much left of her slacks, and Warren was surveying

her at last with satisfied curiosity and smug satisfaction, but she didn't care.

"Glamour's husband was in Cefor," Warren murmured. "He came with the rescue party, poor devil. She's still a fool, but..."

"I know. Is she dead?"

"Not yet. I told her she'd saved the rest of us, which was a lie and not much good to her and her husband anyway, but maybe it was some comfort."

"It wasn't a lie really. She gave you an hour." Virginia shuddered. "Even though if it hadn't been for her we wouldn't have needed it. Why did you let them catch you?"

"To give the others time. And maybe to see how tough you were." He felt his ribs tenderly. "But this hero business has got to stop. The next time something like this happens, I really will let someone else take the risk. All of it, not just some."

He grinned down at her, swaying a little on his feet.

"You first spoke to me about nine hours ago. And you spent a lot of that time hating me. Do you think we've known each other long enough for you to kiss me?"

"Nothing would make me get up."

"Nothing? You want another fight?"

She rose hurriedly. "Anything," she said, "but that."

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"Ned, they've stopped dancing . . . they're coming toward the ship!"

# the TIMELESS ONES

*It was a peaceful world, a green world, where bright blossoms swayed beneath two golden suns. Why did the visitors from Earth sit in their rocket-ship—terrified?*

by FRANK BELKNAP LONG

"THERE WILL BE A GREAT many changes, Ned," Cynthia Jackson said. She stared out the viewport at the little green world which the contact rocket *Star Mist* was swiftly approaching on warp-drive.

Her husband co-pilot nodded, remembering Clifton and Helen Sweeney, and the

Sweeney youngsters. Remembering with a smile Tommy Sweeney's kite-flying antics, his freckles and mischievous eyes—a tow-headed kid of ten with an Irish sense of humor, sturdily planted in a field of alien corn five thousand light years from Earth.

Sowing and reaping and bringing in the sheaves, in the blue light of a great

double sun, his dreams as vibrant with promise as the interstellar warp-drive which, a century ago, had brought the first prospect ship from Earth to the stars.

He'd be a man grown now, as sturdy as his dad. You could almost take that for granted. And his sister would be a willowy girl with clear blue eyes, and she'd come out of a white plastic cottage with the buoyancy of twenty summers in her carriage and smile.

They'd be farmers still. You couldn't change the Sweeneys in a million years, couldn't wean them away from the good earth.

It was funny, but he couldn't even visualize the Sweeneys without thinking of a little sleepy town, the kind of town he'd left himself as a kid to strike out across the great curve of the universe. Dry dust of Kansas and the Dakotas that would still be blowing after a thousand years!

"They've had time to build a town, Ned!" Cynthia said. "A really fine town with broad streets and modern, dust-proof buildings!"

Ned Jackson awoke from his reverie with a wry start. He nodded again, remembering the many other colonists and the equipment which had been shipped to the little green world across the years. Plastic materials to build houses and schools and roadways, educational materials to build eager young minds.

Every ten years a contact rocket went out from Earth by interstellar warp-drive to make a routine check. The trip was a long one—eight months—but the Central Colonization Bureau had to make sure that anarchy did not take the place of law on worlds where teeming jungles encouraged the free exercise of man's best qualities—and his worst.

From end to end of the Galaxy, on large planets and small, progress had to be measured in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number. There could be no other yardstick, for when man ceased to be a social animal his star-conquering genius shriveled to the vanishing point.

"The friends we made here were very special, Ned," Cynthia said. "I guess people who dare greatly have to be a bit keener than the stay-at-homes, a bit more

eager and alive. But the Sweeneys had such a tremendous zest for living—"

"I know," Ned said.

"They were wonderful—generous and kind. It will be good to see them again. Good to—" Cynthia laughed. "I don't know why, but I was about to say: 'Good to be home.'"

Ned thought he knew why.

They'd made their first flight for the Bureau exactly ten years before. It had been a combined "official business" and honeymoon flight, and almost the whole of it had been spent on the little green world.

Did not the queen bee and her consort, flying high above the hive on a night of perfumed darkness, remember best what was bliss to recall, the shifting lights and shadows and honey-scented murmurings of their nuptial trance?

Would not the brightest, furthest star be "home" to the star-beguided?

**T**HE ROCKET SHIP was out of subspace now and traveling on its murmuring overdrive. It was well within sight of green valleys and purple-rimmed hills.

The planet had grown from a tiny dot to a shining silver sphere swimming in misty radiance; for a moment it had wavered against the brightly burning stars, caught in a web of darkness—

Then, swiftly, had exploded into a close, familiar world, as beautiful as a flower opening snowy petals to the dawn.

It was a simple matter to bring the rocket down. The valley seemed to sweep up toward them, and gravity jets took over in automatic sequence. There was a gentle hiss of air as the *Star Mist* settled to rest on hard-packed soil, a scant fifty yards from a blue and vermillion flower garden.

Through a dancing blue haze a dwelling loomed, white and serene in the rosy flush of evening.

Cynthia looked at her husband, her eyes wide with surmise.

"Just shows how close you can come when you follow dial readings!" Ned said. "The first lean-to shack stood just about here. I remember the slope of the soil—"

Cynthia's eyes grew warm and eager.

"Ned, I'm glad—it's no fun searching for old friends with your heart in your throat! We'll step right up and surprise them!"

When they emerged from the ship the perfume of flowers mingled with the richer scent of freshly-turned earth, bringing back memories of their earlier visit.

There had been no flower garden then, but the soil had possessed the same April shower freshness.

"I must look like a fright!" Cynthia said. "You didn't give me time to powder my nose!"

They were within five yards of the dwelling when a door opened and a child of ten or twelve emerged. She was blue-eyed, golden-haired, and she stood for a moment blinking in the evening light, her hair whipped by the wind.

"Mary Sweeney!" Cynthia exclaimed, catching hold of Ned's arm. Then, in a stunned whisper: "Oh, but it can't be! She'd be a grown woman!"

THE CHILD straightened at the sound of the voice, looking about. She saw Ned and Cynthia, and blank amazement came into her eyes. Then she gave a little glad cry, and ran toward them, her arms reaching out in welcome.

"You've come back!" she exclaimed. "Mom and dad thought it would be a long time. But I knew you'd come soon! I knew! I was sure!"

Nowhere any sign that this was not the child they had known ten years before! Her voice, the peaches-and-cream color that flooded her cheeks, the way her hair clung in little ringlets to her temples, all struck memory chords from long ago.

And now she was beckoning them into the dwelling, having moved a little away from them. She was balancing herself in elfin lightness on one toe, and smiling in warm gratefulness, the sun all blue and gold behind her.

She had always seemed an elfin and mischievous child.

"What can it mean, Ned?"

White-lipped, Ned shook his head. "I—I don't know! We'd better go inside!"

Helen Sweeney, her white-streaked auburn hair damp with steam vapor, sent a

frying pan crashing to the floor as she turned from the stove with a startled cry.

"Ned! Cynthia! Why, land sakes, it seems only yesterday—"

Ned had a good look at her face. The eyes were the same, good-humored and kindly and wise; and if she had been forty a decade before she seemed now to be forcing herself back into an earlier instant of time—the very evening of that last well-remembered birthday party, with the candles all bright and gleaming, and the children refusing to admit that she could ever be middle-aged.

Old Clifton came in from his workshop out in back. He'd been whittling away at a rocketship model, and he still held it firmly in the crook of his arm, his eyes puckered in dust bowl grief. Like most men of the soil, Clifton had difficulty with his whittling when he turned his skill to rocketships.

The grief vanished when he saw Ned and Cynthia. Pure delight took hold of him, bringing a quick smile of welcome to his lips.

"Back so soon? Seems only yesterday you folks went away!"

"It was ten years ago!" Ned said, his throat strangely dry.

Clifton looked at him and shook his head. "Ten years, Ned? Surely you're joking!"

"It was a good many years, Clifton," Helen Sweeney said quickly. "You must forgive us, Ned, Cynthia. Time just doesn't seem to matter when you're busy building for the future. Time goes fast, like a great ship at sea, its sails ballooning out with a wind that keeps carrying it faster and faster into the sunrise."

"There are no ships here," Clifton said, chuckling. "Helen's fancy-wedded to Earth, but she's forgetting the last sailing ship rotted away a hundred years before she was born. It's a good thought though."

"Don't know what put a sailing ship in Helen's head, but I guess folks who were born on Earth have a right to hark back a bit. It'll be different with Tom and Mary."

"Where's Tommy?" Ned asked.

"Out shucking corn!" Clifton's voice

was vibrant with sudden pride. "He's still the same reckless young lad. He'd risk his neck to bring in a full harvest. I keep warning him, but he goes right on worrying his mother.

"Fact is, he hasn't changed at all. No more than we have."

So they knew! Cynthia looked at Ned, an unspoken question in her eyes. How could they accept the tremendousness of not changing without realizing that any arrest of the aging process must alter their daily lives in a thousand intangible ways?

How could they build for the future—when their children would never grow up?

It was Ned who discovered the mind block.

Not only had the Sweeneys ceased to age physically—they lacked a normal time sense. If you reminded them of the passing years their minds cleared momentarily, and they could think back.

But that link with the past had no staying power. It was like punching pillows to get them to remember. They lived in the present, well content to accept the world about them on a day-to-day basis, warmed by the bright flame of their children growing up—

But their children weren't growing up—they had only the illusion of change, the illusion of planning for their future; and that illusion was terribly real to them—unless jolted by a question:

"How's Tommy?"

"Why, Tommy hasn't changed at all—"

A puzzled frown. A moment's honest facing of the truth, an old memory stirring into life. Then the mind block closing in, clamping down.

"Ned, Cynthia, you'll stay for dinner?"

**I**T WAS LATE and growing cold, and the stars had appeared in the sky. In the rocket ship Ned sat facing his wife.

"That house was never built by human hands!" he said, a cold prickling at the base of his scalp. He had suffered from the prickling off and on for a full hour. He could still taste the strong coffee he'd downed at a gulp before rising in haste at the end of an uneasy meal.

He was sorry now they'd returned to the ship without waiting to say "hello" to

Tommy, fresh from his harvesting chores. Tommy was the brightest member of the family. Perhaps Tommy knew more than the others—or could remember better.

"Not built by human hands! But that's insane, Ned." Cynthia's face, shadowed from below by the cold light of the instrument board, was harsh with concern. "The materials came from Earth."

"They did," Ned acknowledged. "Grade A plastics—the best. And a good engineer can build almost anything with malleable plastics. But not a house without seams!"

"Without—seams?"

"Joints, connections, little rough places," Ned elaborated. "Inside and out that house was smooth, all of a piece. Like a burst of frozen energy. Like—oh, you know what I mean! Surely you must have noticed it!"

"There were other colonists," Cynthia said. "Some of them were engineers. They've had time to work out new constructive techniques."

"They've had time to disappear. Why did the Sweeneys act so funny when I asked them about the other colonists? Why did Clifton refuse to look at me? Why did I have to drag the answer out of him. 'Oh, we spread out. Enough land here for all of us—' Does that ring true to you?"

"They didn't want us to stay together!" Tommy Sweeney said.

Ned leapt up with a startled cry. Cynthia swayed, her eyes widening in stark disbelief.

Tommy Sweeney walked smiling into the compartment, his shoulders squared. He came through the pilot-room wall in a blaze of light, and stood between Ned and Helen, his lips quivering in boyish earnestness.

"Take any school," Tommy said. "Some of the pupils are bright. Some are just good students who work hard at their homework. Some are stupid and dull. If you let them stay together the bright ones, the really bright ones, get held back."

Tommy seemed suddenly to realize he was seeing Ned and Cynthia for the first time in ten years. His good friends, Ned and Cynthia. A Cynthia who was as beautiful as ever, though deathly pale now, and a Ned who was just a little older and

grayer.

A broad grin overspread his face. "I knew you'd come back!" he said.

"You—*you* came through a solid metal wall!" Ned said, feeling as though an earthquake had taken place inside of him.

"It's easy when you know how!" Tommy said.

"Who taught you how?" Cynthia asked, in a voice so emotional Ned forgot his own horror in concern for her sanity.

"Who taught you, Tommy?"

"The Green People!" Tommy said.

"The Green—People?"

"They live in the forest," Tommy said.

"They come out at night and dance around the house. They hold hands and dance and sing. Then they talk to us. To mom, dad and sis—but mostly to me. They taught me how to play, to really have fun."

"Did they teach you how to change the atoms of your body so that you could pass through a solid metal wall?" Ned asked, framing the question very carefully.

"Shucks, it was nothing like that!" Tommy said. "They just told me that if I forgot about walls I could go anywhere."

"And you believed them!"

Suddenly Cynthia was laughing. Her laughter rang out wild and uncontrollable in the pilot-room.

"He believed them, Ned! He believed them!"

Ned went up to her and took her by the shoulders and shook her.

Tommy looked shamefaced. He shuffled his feet, ill at ease in the presence of adult hysteria.

"I've got to go now!" he stammered. "Mom will be awful mad if I'm late for dinner again."

"You *are* late, Tommy!" Cynthia said. "The joke's on you. We just had dinner with your parents in a house Ned claims wasn't built by human hands."

She laughed wildly. "Your parents are sensible people, though. They didn't even try to walk through the kitchen wall."

"They could if they tried hard enough," Tommy said. "Someday they will."

Tommy looked almost apologetic. "I can't stay any longer. I saw your ship, and wanted to see if you really had come

back. I thought it might be someone else. I'm sure glad it's you."

Tommy turned abruptly and walked straight out of the pilot-room, his small body lighting up the wall until he vanished.

CYNTHIA STARED at her husband, her eyes dark with a questioning horror.

"The Green People," Ned said. "Think, Cynthia. Does the name mean anything to you?"

Cynthia shook her head, her lips shaping a soundless *No*.

Ned sat down slowly, rubbing his jaw. "I just thought you might know something about Druidism, and what the strange rites of that mysterious cult meant to the ancient inhabitants of Gaul and the British Isles. According to the Roman historian Pliny, the Druids built stone houses for their pupils and called themselves the Green People."

Starlight from the viewport illuminated Ned's pale face. He paused, then said: "The Druids were soothsayers and sorcerers who disappeared from history at the time of the Roman conquest. It was widely believed they had the power of conferring eternal youth. They taught that time was an illusion, space the shadow of a dream."

His eyes were grim with speculation. "The Druids were teachers almost in the modern sense. Pliny records that they had a passion for teaching, and thought of their worshippers as pupils, as children with much to learn. Instruction in physical science formed the cornerstone of the Druidic cult."

Cynthia leaned forward, her face strained and intense as he went on.

"The Romans hated and feared them. There was a terrible, bloody battle and the Druids no longer danced in their groves of oak, in slow procession to a weird dirge-like chanting. They vanished from Earth and almost from the memory of man."

Ned took a deep breath.

"Man fears the unknown, and knowledge is a source of danger. Maybe the Druids were never really native to Earth. What if this were their home planet—"

"Ned, you can't really believe—"

"Listen!" Ned said.

The sound was clearly audible through the thin walls of the rocket ship. It was a steady, dull droning—an eerie, terrifying sound.

Ned got up and walked to the viewport. He stared out—

He could see the Sweeney's dwelling clearly. It was bathed in an unearthly green light, and around it in a circle robed figures moved through shadows the color of blood. Around and around in ever widening circles, their tall gaunt bodies strangely bent.

For a full minute he stared out. When his wife joined him he stretched out a hand and let it rest lightly on her shoulder.

"Perhaps we wouldn't be far wrong if we thought of the Sweeneys as catalysts!" he said.

Cynthia stood very straight and quiet, a great fear growing in her.

"Catalysts, Ned?"

"It's just a wild guess, of course. I can't even tell you what made me think of it. But it does have a certain relevancy. In chemistry, as you know, a catalytic agent is a substance which promotes chemical action; but is *in itself unchanged*."

"Well?"

"Why do men and women who surrender themselves to sorcery remain, in legend, eternally young? Young, unchanging. It's a belief as old as prehistory and all the ages since. Only in the Middle Ages were witches pictured as shrunken, hideous old women. The ancient world pictured witches as eternally youthful, unaging."

A long pause, and then Ned said: "As unaging as the forests of oak where they served as human catalysts for the Druids before the Druids left Earth forever?"

He suddenly seemed to be thinking aloud rather than addressing his wife.

"Well—and why not? The Druids must change, for change is the first law of life. But perhaps they can only find complete fulfillment, can only grow in wisdom and strength, by using human beings as little hard grains of chemical substance which must remain forever bright and shining.

"Human catalysts, imprisoned in a horrible little test tube of a house. If human beings aged and changed they would cease

to be catalysts. They would become valueless to the Druids. And when the Romans discovered the truth—"

Agreement was clearly in Cynthia's eyes. She moved closer to the viewport, her face pale.

"Fear, and a merciless hatred," Ned said. "Pursuing the Druids, driving them from Earth. And dim, fearful legends remaining of a dark magic older than the human race."

"Ned, they've stopped dancing!" Cynthia's voice rang out sharply in the silence. "They're coming toward the ship!"

"I know," Ned said.

"But we don't know what they're planning to do!" Cynthia's voice rose. "We've got to get out!"

"Steady," Ned said, turning. "If we take off at peak acceleration I just can't picture them stopping us!"

"NED, the Sweeneys may be happier than we know," Cynthia said, hours later. They were deep in subspace, a hundred light years from the little green world; and, in the warm security of the pilot-room, its menacing shadows seemed immeasurably remote.

"Happy?" Ned laughed harshly. "Kids who'll never grow up. Adults cut off from all further growth. The same today, tomorrow and forever."

"Their minds may change," Cynthia said. "Their minds may grow, Ned. Tommy said that bright pupils could go far."

"As catalysts, caught in a ghastly trap."

"How can you be so sure, Ned? A wild guess, you called it. How do you know the Druids and the Sweeneys don't learn from one another? Perhaps they grow wise together, in a wonderful bright sharing of knowledge and happiness that's like nothing we can imagine."

Ned looked at his wife. "Why say a thing like that? Why even think of it?"

"Pandora, I guess."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a woman and the Pandora complex is pretty basic, darling. I'd be tempted to go back and throw open the box."

"Something pretty black and horrible would come out," Ned said sharply. "You can take my word for that. I hope you're

not forgetting that Pandora was the first woman chosen by Zeus to bring complete ruin on the human race."

"She didn't quite succeed. And how can we know for sure, Ned? If what you say is true, if the Druids were really driven from Earth, we haven't done so well since. Wars and madness for two thousand years. Destruction and cruelty and death."

"All you have to do is prove we'd be better off if the Druids had stayed," Ned said.

"Darling, think. If people grew wiser all the time, if they never aged, would they want to murder one another?"

"Now see here—"

Cynthia smiled. "Think of having our own beautiful little home forever, in a fragrant woody patch, with shining kitchen utensils on the wall. Think of being spared all the miseries of old age and poverty and sickness and death."

"Think of having neighbors like the Sweeneys to grow young with, to grow wise and young with, day by splendid day until the end of time."

There was a long silence, and then Cynthia said: "I'd trust them, Ned. The Druids, I mean. I'd take the chance. What have we to lose that's really great, that can hold a candle to what the Sweeneys have?"

"You can go anywhere if you just remember how close you are to where you want to be!" Tommy Sweeney said, coming

through the pilot room wall in a blaze of light. He grinned. "I asked mom and dad to try real hard this time and here they are!"

All of the Sweeneys came into the pilot room as Tommy spoke, their faces incredibly radiant.

"I never really believed Tommy until this minute!" Clifton Sweeney said. "If you just forget about walls you're where you want to be!"

"Sure you are!" Tommy said. "It's as easy as skinning a chipmunk."

"Ned, Cynthia," Helen Sweeney said. "Come back!"

Tommy's sister simply smiled, a mischievous elfin smile which seemed to mock the vast loneliness of space. It was as if some wizard game, played by laughing children and wise forest creatures through long golden afternoons, had become a universe-spanning web, embracing everything in its path in a warm and radiant way.

Cynthia looked at Dan. "Well, darling?"

"Yes," Ned said, with quick decision. "We'll go back!"

*And at that moment, in the forest deep and dark, the Druids built another house. It was designed to appeal to a man and a woman who had traveled far and grown weary of human cruelty and death. It was designed for gracious living; but whether the Druids, in their inscrutable wisdom, wished mankind well or ill, who could say?*





# temple of Han

A Short Story by JACK VANCE

*To steal the shimmering Eye of Han—  
that was no trick for the wily Terran.  
To hand back the great green jewel,  
to give his body to priestly torture—  
that was asking much of a space-rogue.*

IN THE NIP-AND-TUCK BUSINESS of keeping himself alive, Briar Kelly had not yet been able to shed his disguise. The adventure had turned out rather more ruggedly than it had started. He had not bargained for so much hell.

Up to the moment he had entered the queer dark temple at North City, the disguise had served him well. He had been one with the Hans; no one had looked at him twice. Then, once inside the temple, he was alone and disguise was unnecessary.

It was an oddly impressive place. A Gothic web of trusses supported the ceiling; alcoves along the walls were crammed with bric-a-brac. Red and green lamps cast an illumination which was stifled and absorbed by black drapes.

Walking slowly down the central nave, every nerve tingling, Kelly had approached the tall black mirror at the far end, watching his looming reflection with hypnotic fascination. There were limpid depths beyond, and Kelly would have looked more closely had he not seen the jewel.

It was a ball of cool green fire resting on a black velvet cushion. With marvelling fingers Kelly had lifted it, turned it over and over—and then tumult had broken loose. The red and green lights flickered; an alarm horn brayed like a crazy bull. Vengeful priests appeared in the alcoves as if by magic, and the disguise had become a liability. The tubular black cloak constricted his legs as he ran—back along the aisle, down the shabby steps, through

the foul back alleys to his air-boat. Now as he crouched low over the controls, sweat beaded up under the white grease-paint, and his skin itched and crawled.

Ten feet below, the salt-crusted mud-flats fled astern. Dirty yellow rushes whipped the hull. Pressing an elbow to his hip Kelly felt the hard shape of the jewel. The sensation aroused mixed feelings, apprehension predominating. He dropped the boat even closer to the ground. "Five minutes of this, I'll be out of radar range," thought Kelly. "Back at Bucktown, I'm just one among fifty thousand. They can't very well locate me, unless Herli talks, or Mapes . . ."

He hazarded a glance at the rear-vision plate. North City could still be seen, an exaggerated Mont St. Michel jutting up from the dreary salt-marsh. Misty exhalations blurred the detail; it faded into the sky, finally dropped below the horizon. Kelly eased up the nose of the boat, rose tangentially from the surface, aiming into Magra Taratempas, the hot white sun.

The atmosphere thinned, the sky deepened to black, stars came out. There was old Sol, a yellow star hanging between Sadal Suud and Sadal Melik in Aquarius—only thirty light years to home—

Kelly heard a faint swishing sound. The light changed, white to red. He blinked, looked around in bewilderment.

Magra Taratempas had disappeared. Low to the left a giant red sun hulked above the horizon; below, the salt marshes swam in a new claret light.



*One of the towering shadows shrunk, condensed, swirled to a man-like shape . . .*

In amazement Kelly gazed from red sun to planet, back up across the heavens where Magra Taratempas had hung only a moment before.

"I've gone crazy," said Kelly. "Unless . . ."

**T**WO OR THREE MONTHS before, a peculiar rumor had circulated Bucktown. For lack of better entertainment, the sophisticates of the city had made a joke of the story, until it finally grew stale and was no more heard.

Kelly, who worked as computer switchman at the astrogation station, was well-acquainted with the rumor. It went to the effect that a Han priest, dour and intense under his black cloak, had been tripped into the marsh by a drunken pollen-collector. Like a turtle the priest had shoved his white face out from under the hood of his cloak, and rasped in the pidgin of the planet: "You abuse the priest of Han; you mock us and the name of the Great God. Time is short. The Seventh Year is at hand, and you godless Earth-things will seek to flee, but there will be nowhere for you to go."

Such had been the tale. Kelly remembered the pleased excitement which had fluttered from tongue to tongue. He grimaced, examined the sky in new apprehension.

The facts were before his eyes, undeniable. Magra Taratempas had vanished. In a different quarter of the sky a new sun had appeared.

Careless of radar tracing, he nosed up and broke entirely clear of the atmosphere. The stellar patterns had changed. Blackness curtained half the sky, with here and there a lone spark of a star or the wisp of a far galaxy. To the other quarter a vast blot of light stretched across the sky, a narrow elongated luminosity with a central swelling, the whole peppered with a million tiny points of light.

Kelly cut the power from his engine; the air-boat drifted. Unquestionably the luminous blot was a galaxy seen from one of its outer fringes. In ever-growing bewilderment, Kelly looked back at the planet below. To the south he could see the triangular plateau shouldering up from the swamp, and Lake Lenore near Buck-

town. Below was the salt marsh, and far to the north, the rugged pile where the Hans had their city.

"Let's face it," said Kelly. "Unless I'm out of my mind—and I don't think I am—the entire planet has been picked up and taken to a new sun . . . I've heard of strange things here and there, but this is it . . ."

He felt the weight of the jewel in his pocket, and with it a new thrill of apprehension. To the best of his knowledge the Han Priests could not identify him. At Bucktown it had been Herli and Mapes who had urged him into the escapade, but they would hold their tongues. Ostensibly he had flown to his cabin along the lake-shore, and there was no one to know of his comings and goings . . . He turned the boat down toward Bucktown, and a half hour later landed at his cabin beside Lake Lenore. He had scraped the grease-paint from his face; the cloak he had jettisoned over the swamp; and the jewel weighed heavy in his pocket.

The cabin, a low flat-roofed building with aluminum walls and a glass front, appeared strange and unfamiliar in the new light. Kelly walked warily to the door. He looked right and left. No one, nothing was visible. He put his ear to the panel of the door. No sound.

He slid back the panel, stepped inside, swept the interior with a swift glance. Everything appeared as he had left it.

He started toward the visiphone, then halted.

The jewel.

He took it from his pocket, examined it for the first time. It was a sphere the size of a golf-ball. The center shone with a green fire, decreasing toward the outer surface. He hefted it. It was unnaturally heavy. Strangely fascinating, altogether lovely. Think of it around the neck of Lynette Mason . . .

Not now. Kelly wrapped it in paper, tucked it into an empty pint jar. Behind the cabin, an old shag-bark slanted up out of the black humus and overhung the roof like a gray and tattered beach-umbrella. Kelly dug a hole under one of the arched roots, buried the jewel.

Returning to the cabin, he walked to

the visiphone, reached out to call the station. While his hand was yet a foot from the buttons, the buzzer sounded . . . Kelly drew his hand back.

Better not to answer.

The buzzer sounded again—again. Kelly stood holding his breath, looking at the blank face of the screen.

Silence.

He washed the last of the grease-paint from his face, changed his clothes, ran outside, jumped into his air-boat and took off for Bucktown.

HE LANDED on the roof of the station, noting that Herli's car was parked in its wonted slot. Suddenly he felt less puzzled and forlorn. The station with its machinery and solid Earth-style regulations projected reassurance, a sense of normality. Somehow the ingenuity and aggressive attack which had taken men to the stars would solve the present enigma.

Or would it? Ingenuity could take men through space, but ingenuity would find itself strained locating a speck of a planet a hundred thousand light-years in an unknown direction. And Kelly still had his own problem: the jewel. Into his mind's-eye came a picture: the cabin by the lake, the dilapidated gray parasol of the shag-bark, and glowing under the root, the green eye of the sacred jewel. In the vision he saw the black-robed figure of a Han priest moving across the open space before the cabin, and he saw the flash of the dough-white face . . .

Kelly turned a troubled glance up at the big red sun, entered the station.

The administration section was vacant; Kelly climbed the stair to the operation department.

He stopped in the doorway, surveyed the room. It covered the entire square of the upper floor. Work-benches made a circuit of the room, with windows above. A polished cylinder, the cosmoscope, came down through the ceiling, and below was the screen to catch the projection.

Four men stood by the star-index, running a tape. Herli glanced up briefly, turned back to the clicking mechanism.

Strange. Herli should have been interested, should at least have said hello.

Kelly self-consciously crossed the room. He cleared his throat. "Well—I made it. I'm back."

"So I see," said Herli.

Kelly fell silent. He glanced up through the window at the red sun. "What do you make of it?"

"Not the least idea. We're running the star-tapes on the off chance it's been registered—a last-gasp kind of hope."

There was more silence. They had been talking before he had entered the room; Kelly sensed this from their posture.

At last Mapes said with a forced casualness, "Seen the news?"

"No," said Kelly. "No, I haven't." There was more in Mapes' voice, something more personal than the shift of the planet. After a moment's hesitation he went to the visiphone, pushed the code for news.

The screen, lit, showed a view of the swamp. Kelly leaned forward. Buried up to their necks were a dozen boys and girls from the Bucktown High-school. Crawling eagerly over them were the small three-legged salt-crabs; others popped up out of the slime, or tunnelled under toward the squirming bodies.

Kelly could not stand the screams. He reached forward—

Herli said sharply, "Leave it on!"—harder than Kelly had ever heard him speak. "The announcement is due pretty soon."

The announcement came, in the rasping toneless pidgin of the Han priests.

"Among the outsiders is a wicked thief. He has despoiled us of the Seven-year Eye. Let him come forward for his due. Until the thief has brought the Seven-year Eye in his own hand to the sacred temple of Han, every hour one of the outsiders will be buried in the crab-warren. If the thief hangs back, all will be so dealt with, and there will be an end to the Earth-things."

Mapes said in a tight voice, "Did you take their Seven-year Eye?"

Kelly nodded numbly. "Yes."

Herli made a sharp sound in his throat, turned-away.

Kelly said miserably, "I don't know what came over me. There it was—glow-

ing like a little green moon . . . I took it."

Herli said gutturally, "Don't just stand there."

Kelly reached out to the visiphone, pushed buttons. The screen changed, a Han priest stared forth into Kelly's face.

Kelly said, "I stole your jewel . . . Don't kill any more people. I'll bring it back to you."

The Priest said, "Every hour until you arrive one of the Earth-things dies a wicked death."

Kelly leaned forward, slammed off the screen with a sudden furious sweep of his hand. He turned in anger.

"Don't stand there glaring at me! You, Herli, you told me I wouldn't even make it into the temple! And if any of you guys had been where I was and saw that jewel like I saw it, you'd have taken it too."

Mapes growled under his breath. Herli's shoulders seemed to sag; he looked away. "Maybe you're right, Briar."

Kelly said, "Are we helpless? Why didn't we fight when they took those twelve kids? There's maybe a million Huns, but there's fifty thousand of us—and they have no weapons that I know of."

"They've seized the power station," said Herli. "Without power we can't distill water, we can't radiate our hydroponics. We're in a cleft stick."

Kelly turned away. "So long, fellows."

No one answered him. He walked down the stairs, across the parking strip to his air-car. He was conscious of their eyes looking down from the window.

In, up, away. First to his cabin by the lake, under the shag-bark for the Seven-year Eye, then the arc over the planet, south to north. Then the gray fortress of North Settlement, and the dark temple in the center.

**K**ELLY dropped the air-car directly in front of the temple. No reason now for stealth.

He climbed to the ground, looked about through the strange purple twilight which had come to the ramshackle city. A few Huns moved past, and Kelly saw the flash of their faces.

He walked slowly up the steps to the temple, paused indecisively in the door-

way. There was no point in adding further provocation to his offenses. No doubt they planned to kill him; he might as well make it as easy as possible.

"Hello," he called into the dark interior, in a voice he tried to keep firm. "Any priests in there? I've brought back the jewel . . ."

There was no response. Listening intently, he could hear a distant murmur. He took a few steps into the temple, peered up the nave. The muffled red and green illumination confused rather than aided his vision. He noticed a curious irregularity to the floor. He took a step forward—another—another—he stepped on something soft. There was the flash of white below him. The floor was covered by the black-robed priests, lying flat on their faces.

The priest he had trod on made no sound. Kelly hesitated. Time was passing . . . He crammed all his doubts, fears, vacillations into a corner of his mind, strode forward, careless of where he stepped.

Down the center of the nave he walked, holding the green jewel in his hand. Ahead he saw the sheen of the tall black mirror, and there on the black cushion was a second jewel identical to the one he carried. A Han priest stood like a ghost in a black robe, he watched Kelly approach without movement. Kelly laid the jewel on the cushion beside its twin.

"There it is. I've brought it back. I'm sorry I took it. I—well, I acted on a wild impulse."

The priest picked up the jewel, held it under his chin as if feeling the warmth from the green fire.

"Your impulse has cost fifteen Earth lives."

"Fifteen?" faltered Kelly. "There were but twelve—"

"Two hours delay has sent two to the crab warren," said the Han. "And yourself. Fifteen."

Kelly said with a shaky bravado, "You're taking a lot on yourself—these murders—"

"I am not acquainted with your idiom," said the priest, "but it seems as if you convey a foolish note of menace. What can

you few Earth-things do against Great God Han, who has just now taken our planet across the galaxy?"

Kelly said stupidly, "Your god Han—moved the planet?"

"Certainly. He has taken us far and forever distant from Earth to this mellow sun; such is his gratitude for our prayers and for the tribute of the Eye."

Kelly said with studied carelessness, "You have your jewel back; I don't see why you're so indignant—"

The priest said, "Look here." Kelly followed his gesture, saw a square black hole edged with a coping of polished stone. "This shaft is eighteen miles deep. Every priest of Han descends to the bottom once a week and carries back to the surface a basket of crystallized stellite. On rare occasions the matrix of the Eye is found, and then there is gratification in the city . . . Such a jewel did you steal."

Kelly took his eyes away from the shaft. Eighteen miles . . . "I naturally wasn't aware of the—"

"No matter; the deed is done. And now the planet has been moved, and Earth power is unable to prevent such punishments as we wish to visit upon you."

Kelly tried to keep his voice firm. "Punish? What do you mean?"

Behind him he heard a rustling, the shuffle of movement. He looked over his shoulder. The black cloaks merged with the drapes of the temple, and the Han faces floated in mid-air.

"You will be killed," said the priest. Kelly stared into the white face. "If the manner of your going is of any interest to you—" The priest conveyed details which froze Kelly's flesh, clabbered the moisture in his mouth. "Your death will thereby deter other Earth-things from like crimes."

Kelly protested in spite of himself. "You have your jewel; there it is . . . If you insist on killing me—kill me, but—"

"Strange," said the Han priest. "You Earth-things fear pain more than anything else you can conceive. This fear is your deadliest enemy. We Hans now, we fear nothing—" he looked up at the tall black mirror, bowed slightly "—nothing but our Great God Han."

Kelly stared at the shimmering black surface. "What's that mirror to do with your God Han?"

"That is no mirror; that is the portal to the place of the Gods, and every seven years a priest goes through to convey the Eye to Han."

Kelly tried to plumb the dark depths of the mirror. "What lies beyond? What kind of land?"

The priest made no answer.

Kelly laughed in a shrill voice he did not recognize. He lurched forward, threw up his fist in a blow which carried every ounce of his strength and weight. He struck the priest at a point where a man's jaw would be, felt a brittle crunch. The priest spun around, fell in the tangle of his cloak.

Kelly turned on the priests in the nave, and they sighed in fury. Kelly was desperate, fearless now. He laughed again, reached down, scooped both jewels from the cushion. "Great God Han lives behind the mirror, and moves planets for jewels. I have two jewels; maybe Han will move a planet for me . . ."

He jumped close to the black mirror. He put out his hand and felt a soft surface like a curtain of air. He paused in sudden trepidation. Beyond was the unknown . . .

Pushing at him came the first rank of the Han priests. Here was the known.

Kelly could not delay. Death was death. If he died passing through the black curtain, if he suffocated in airless space—it was clean fast death.

He leaned forward, closed his eyes, held his breath, stepped through the curtain.

**K**ELLY had come a tremendous distance. It was a distance not to be reckoned in miles or hours, but in quantities like abstract, irrational ideas.

He opened his eyes. They functioned; he could see. He was not dead . . . Or was he? . . . He took a step forward, sensed solidity under his feet. He looked down, saw a glassy black floor where small sparks burst, flickered, died. Constellations? Universes? Or merely—sparks?

He took another step. It might have been a yard, a mile, a light-year; he moved with

the floating ease of a man walking in a dream.

He stood on the lip of an amphitheater, a bowl like a lunar crater. He took another step; he stood in the center of the bowl. He halted, fought to convince himself of his consciousness. Blood made a rushing sound as it flowed through his veins. He swayed, might have fallen if gravity had existed to pull him down. But there was no gravity. His feet clung to the surface by some mysterious adhesion beyond his experience. The blood-sound rose and fell in his ears. Blood meant life. He was alive.

He looked in back of him, and in the blurring of his eyes could not distinguish what he saw. He turned, took a step forward—

He was intruding. He felt the sudden irritated attention of gigantic personalities.

He gazed about the glassy floor, and the faintest of watery gray lights seeping down from above collected in the concavity where he stood. Space was vast, interminable, without perspective.

Kelly saw the beings he had disturbed—felt rather than saw them: a dozen giant shapes looming above.

One of these shapes formed a thought, and a surge of meaning permeated space, impinged on Kelly's mind, willy-nilly translating itself into words:

"What is this thing? From whose world did it come?"

"From mine." This must be Han. Kelly looked from shape to shape, to determine which the god might be.

"Remove it quickly—" and to Kelly's mind came a jumble of impressions he had no words to express. "We must deal with the matter of . . ." Again a quick listing of ideas which refused to translate in Kelly's mind. He felt Han's attention focussing on him. He stood transfixed, waiting for the obliteration he knew to be imminent.

But he held the jewels, and their green glow shone up through his fingers. He cried out, "Wait, I came here for a purpose; I want a planet put back where it belongs, and I have jewels to pay—"

He felt the baleful pressure of Han's will on his mind—increasing, increasing; he groaned in helpless anguish.

"Wait," came a calm thought, transcendently clear and serene.

"I must destroy it," Han protested. "It is the enemy of my jewel-senders."

"Wait," came from yet another of the shades, and Kelly caught a nuance of antagonism to Han. "We must act judiciously."

"Why are you here?" came the query of the Leader.

Kelly said, "The Han priests are murdering people of my race, ever since the planet we live on was moved. It's not right."

"Ah!" came a thought like an exclamation from the Antagonist. "Han's jewel-senders do evil and unnatural deeds."

"A minor matter, a minor matter," came the restless thought of still another shape. "Han must protect his jewel-senders."

And Kelly caught the implication that the jewel-sending was of cardinal importance; that the jewels were vital to the gods.

The Antagonist chose to make an issue of the matter. "The condition of injustice which Han has effected must be abated."

The Leader meditated. And now came a sly thought to Kelly, which he sensed had been channelled to his mind alone. It came from the Antagonist. "Challenge Han to a . . ." The thought could only be translated as "duel". "I will aid you. Relax your mind." Kelly, grasping at any straw, loosened his mental fibers, and felt something like a damp shadow entering his brain, absorbing, recording. . . . All in an instant. The contact vanished.

**K**ELLY felt the Leader's mind wavering over in favor of Han. He said hurriedly, improvising as best he could: "Leader, in one of the legends of Earth, a man journeyed to the land of the giants. As they came to kill him, he challenged the foremost to a duel with his life at stake." "Of three trials," came a thought. "Of three trials," added Kelly. "In the story, the man won and was permitted to return to his native land. After this fashion let me duel in three trials with Han."

The surge of thoughts thickened the air—rancorous contempt from Han, sly encouragement from the Antagonist,

amusement from the Leader.

"You invoke a barbaric principle," said the Leader. "But by a simple yet rigorous logic, it is a just device, and shall be honored. You shall duel Han in three trials."

"Why waste time?" inquired Han. "I can powder him to less than the atoms of atoms."

"No," said the Leader. "The trial may not be on a basis of sheer potential. You and this man are at odds over an issue which has no fundamental right or wrong. It is the welfare of his people opposed to the welfare of your jewel-senders. Since the issues are equal, there would be no justice in an unequal duel. The trial must be on a basis which will not unwontedly handicap either party."

"Let a problem be stated," suggested the Antagonist. "He who first arrives at a solution wins the trial."

Han was scornfully silent. So the Leader formulated a problem—a terrific statement whose terms were dimensions and quasi-time and a dozen concepts which Kelly's brain could in no wise grasp. But the Antagonist intervened.

"That is hardly a fair problem, lying as it does entirely out of the man's experience. Let me formulate a problem." And he stated a situation which at first startled Kelly, and then brought him hope.

The problem was one he had met a year previously at the station. A system to integrate twenty-five different communication bands into one channel was under consideration, and it was necessary to thrust a beam of protons past a bank of twenty-five mutually inter-acting magnets and hit a pin-point filter at the far end of the case. The solution was simple enough—a statement of the initial vector in terms of a coordinate equation and a voltage potential—yet the solution had occupied the station calculator for two months. Kelly knew this solution as he knew his own name.

"Hurry!" came the Antagonist's secret thought.

Kelly blurted out the answer.

There was a wave of astonishment through the group, and he felt their suspicious inspection.

"You are quick indeed," said the Lead-

er, non-plussed.

"Another problem," called the Antagonist. Once more he brought a question from Kelly's experience, this concerning the behavior of positrons in the secondary layer of a star in a cluster of six, all at specified temperatures and masses. And this time Kelly's mind worked faster. He immediately stated the answer. Still he anticipated Han by mere seconds.

Han protested, "How could this small pink brain move faster than my cosmic consciousness?"

"How is this?" asked the Leader. "How do you calculate so swiftly?"

Kelly fumbled for ideas, finally strung together a lame statement: "I do not calculate. In my brain is a mass of cells whose molecules form themselves into models of the problems. They move in an instant, the problem is solved, and the solution comes to me."

Anxiously he waited, but the reply seemed to satisfy the group. These creatures—or gods, if such they were—were they so naive? Only the Antagonist suggested complex motives. Han, Kelly sensed, was old, of great force, of a hard and inflexible nature. The Leader was venerable beyond thought, calm and untroubled as space itself.

"What now?" came from the Antagonist. "Shall there be another problem? Or shall the man be declared the victor?"

Kelly would have been well pleased to let well enough alone, but this evidently did not suit the purposes of the Antagonist; hence his quiet jeer.

"No!" The thoughts of Han roared forth almost like sound. "Because of a ridiculous freak in this creature's brain, must I admit him my superior? I can fling him through a thousand dimensions with a thought, snap him out of existence, out of memory—"

"Perhaps because you are a god," came the Antagonist's taunt, "and of pure—" another confusing concept, a mixture of energy, divinity, force, intelligence. "The man is but a combination of atoms, and moves through the oxidation of carbon and hydrogen. Perhaps if you were as he, he might face you hand to hand and defeat you."



A curious tenseness stiffened the mental atmosphere. Han's thoughts came sluggishly, tinged for the first time with doubt.

"Let that be the third trial," said the Leader composedly. Han gave a mental shrug. One of the towering shadows shrunk, condensed, swirled to a man-like shape, solidified further, at last stood facing Kelly, a thing like a man, glowing with a green phosphorescence like the heart of the Seven-year Eye.

The Antagonist's secret thought came to Kelly: "Seize the jewel at the back of the neck."

**K**ELLY scanned the slowly advancing figure. It was exactly his height and heft, naked, but radiating an inhuman confidence. The face was blurred, fuzzy, and Kelly could never afterward describe the countenance. He tore his gaze away.

"How do we fight?" he demanded, beads of sweat dripping from his body. "Do we set any rules—or no holds barred?"

"Tooth and nail," came the calm thoughts of the Leader. "Han now has organic sensibilities like yours. If you kill this body, or render it unconscious, you win. If you lose this trial, then we shall decide."

"Suppose he kills me?" objected Kelly, but no one seemed to heed his protest.

Han came glaring-eyed at him. Kelly took a step backward, jabbed tentatively with his left fist. Han rushed forward. Kelly punched furiously, kneed the on-rushing body, heard it grunt and fall, to leap erect instantly. A tingle of joy ran down Kelly's spine, and more confidently he stepped forward, lashing out with rights and lefts. Han leapt close and clinched his arms around Kelly's body. Now he began to squeeze, and Kelly felt a power greater than any man's in those green-glowing arms.

"The jewel," came a sly thought. Sparks were exploding in Kelly's eyes; his ribs creaked. He swung a frenzied hand, clawing at Han's neck. He felt a hard protuberance, he dug his nails under, tore the jewel free.

A shrill cry of utmost pain and horror—and the god-man puffed away into black smoke which babbled in a frenzy back and

forth through the darkness. It surged around Kelly, and little tendrils of the smoke seemed to pluck at the jewel clenched in his hand. But they had no great force, and Kelly found he could repel the wisps with the power of his own brain.

He suddenly understood the function of the jewel. It was the focus for the god. It centralized the myriad forces. The jewel gone, the god was a welter of conflicting volitions, vagrant impulses.

Kelly felt the Antagonist's triumphant thoughts. And he himself felt an elation he had never known before. The Leader's cool comment brought him back to himself:

"You seem to have won the contest." There was a pause. "In the absence of opposition we will render any requests you may make." There was no concern in his thoughts for the decentralized Han. The black smoke was dissipating, Han was no more than a memory. "Already you have delayed us long. We have the problem of—" the now familiar confusion of ideas, but this time Kelly understood vaguely. It seemed that there was a vortex of universes which possessed consciousness, as mighty or mightier than these gods, which was driving on a course that would be incommoding. There were qualifications, a host of contributory factors.

"Well," said Kelly, "I'd like you to move the planet I just came from back to its old orbit around Magra Taratempos. If you know what planet and what star I'm talking about."

"Yes." The Leader made a small exertion. "The world you mention moves in its previous orbit."

"Suppose the Han priests come through the portal and want it moved again?"

"The portal no longer exists. It was held open by Han; when Han dissolved, the portal closed . . . Is that the total of your desires?"

Kelly's mind raced, became a turmoil. This was his chance. Wealth, longevity, power, knowledge . . . Somehow thoughts would not form themselves—and there were curses attached to unnatural gifts—

"I'd like to get back to Bucktown safely . . ."

Kelly found himself in the glare of the

outer world. He stood on the hill above Bucktown, and he breathed the salt air of the marshes. Above hung a hot white sun—Magra Taratempos.

He became aware of an object clenched in his hand. It was the jewel he had torn out of Han's neck. There were two others in his pocket.

Across the city he saw the light-blue

and stainless-steel box of the station. What should he tell Herli and Mapes? Would they believe the truth? He looked at the three jewels. One was for Lynette Mason's brown young neck. The other two he could sell on Earth . . . Better take it up with Lynette. She'd believe him. She'd listen enthralled while he told her of how he fought Great God Han . . .

smashers which inhabit your pages. They seem almost superficial and petty in comparison, yet, looking below the surface, one finds a good story. Like *ASTEROID OF FEAR*, for instance.

Well, well, I see Leigh Brackett has resurrected the poor man's John Carter. I had been beginning to think he'd fallen into an ice fissure on Mercury (cold side) or been done in by one of those beautiful but deadly females he's always encountering. No such luck. *BLACK AMAZON* hauls down fourth place anyway, for an interesting ninety minutes. And a special award jointly to Brackett and Anderson for worst kept secret of the year. And I doubt if the Ciara (n) depicted by Anderson could lift that axe, much less throw it. Ah well, small points at best, and a lovely cover regardless. I'm MAD about yellow. Less eyestrain, you know.

Van Vogt would have ranked higher but for his usual vagueness and lack of color. Fyfe was fine, but somebody has to be last.

Now tell me, sir, just how did you get such illustrations to go with the stories? Did you get an increase in your budget or are you using blackmail? A Cartier, two Orbars, and even Mayan and Vestal have improved (had to happen sooner or later). Now that you've broken you-know-who's monopoly on Cartier, keep him a while. Use logical argument. If that doesn't work, try leg-irons.

As usual, the Vizigraph was most interesting. I vote for Gibson, Strong, and Beale. I hope Dennis Strong realizes the extent of the hornet's nest he has stirred up. Advice, Dennis: for the next two months don't answer the door unarmed, don't leave the house, and soak all packages thoroughly in water. A concrete shelter in the basement might help, too.

Matter of fact, I've felt about the same way after reading some of La Vizi's offerings, but I used discretion and contented myself with a few deep-throated growls. After all, I want to make friends in the world of science-fiction, not enemies. Besides, Dennis, what would we letter-hacks do if we couldn't fire these "meaningless excrescences" at the long-suffering editors? We'd be bundles of frustrations—I would, anyway. With a few exceptions, everybody keeps it light and nobody gets hurt. Climb down from your ivory tower, friend, and join us pseudo-intellectuals and parasitical dilettantes. You'll have a lot more fun.

Sincerely,  
DICK RYAN

## QX, FELLA . . . WE GOT THE JETS FOR THE JOB!

1706 Nueces  
Austin, Texas

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Whilst browsing through the March PS, I chanced to come across the communique in La Vizi from Friend Dennis Strong. Instantly if not sooner, I dislodged the lush blonde who was entwined around my neck, tossed recklessly aside the volume on nuclear physics I was reading with my other eye, and blasted open my vault in the atomic storm cellar. Having extracted two cents from said vault, I would like to toss them into the fray. Hokay?

There is some point to Mr. Strong's explosion, but hardly a staggering amount. Of course it is disconcerting to run across readers who cannot distinguish between Bradbury and a comic book. Of course not all attempts at humor are screamingly funny. Of course there is a lunatic fringe—there always is. But to damn the faithful as "parasitical dilettantes" seems to me to be going a bit far. After all, it was these same "parasites" who did much to keep science-fiction going in the dark days when sfantasy was the skeleton in the closet of literature—they supported it, they introduced it to their friends, they risked ridicule because they were intelligent enough to believe in what they liked.

It is rather interesting, I think, to look back at some of the old letter columns. The parasites, bigawd, have some startlingly (whoops!) familiar names—Jack Williamson, Henry Kuttner, John W. Campbell, Jr., Robert Bloch. Then Asimov and Bradbury—and still later Larry Shaw, Gene Hunter, Milt Lesser, and the rest. As Shakespeare once said, "If these be parasites, then what a rogue and peasant slave am I." (From *A Midsummer Night's BEM*, Act II, Scene IV.)

I feel that the letter writers definitely have contributed a great deal to science fiction, and I say more power to them. Some of my best friends are letter writers. Just because The Field is growing up is no reason to put on the drooping face and read PS with *The Saturday Review* in one hand and a slide rule in the other. Let's have some fun along the way, and a nice screwball letter never hurt anyone. We live in a democracy, I'm told, and opinions are bound to be at variance. It is only when everyone thinks alike that the things in which we believe are in danger.

Neither Mr. Strong nor anyone else is in a position to state dogmatically that it shall be thus-and-so and that you shall read only this—

(Continued on p. III)

# MERCY FLIGHT

by MACK REYNOLDS

*It was a lesson you learned in the Space-Forces, and you learned it good: Out in the lonely void, when you get in a jam, you're on your own . . . it's you against everything and everybody. Anything goes . . .*

THE PHONE RANG AND ED Kerry wasn't doing anything so he picked it up and said, "Yeah?"

He said yeah a few more times, his eyes widening infinitesimally each time, and finally wound up with, "Okay, Bunny."

He hung up and said, "That was Bunny, up in Oneonta. She says a guy is coming in from Luna with a kid for emergency hospitalization, radiation burns or something."

Jake was sitting back in his swivel chair, his feet on the desk and his hands clasped behind his head. He growled, "That's the trouble with women in this game; they've got no story sense. She phones all the way from Oneonta on a story that's been run a hundred times. Every time somebody gets good and sick up on Luna they bring 'em to Earth for treatment." He shrugged. "Okay, so it's a kid this time. Do up about a stick of it, Kerry, and we'll put it on page three if you can work it into a tear-jerker."

Ed Kerry said, "You didn't let me finish, Jake. Something's wrong with this guy's radio."

Somebody on the rewrite desk said, "Something wrong with his radio? He's gotta have his radio or he can't come in."

Jake took his feet from the desk and sat up. "What'd' ya mean, something's wrong with his radio?"

"Bunny said he's calling for his landing instructions but they can't get anything back to him. He's just reached *Brennschluss* and he's in free fall now; it'll be four days before he gets here. That's the way they work it—he's supposed to get

in touch with the spaceport he wants to land at, and . . ."

"I know how they work it," Jake growled. "See if there's anything on the last newswire from Luna about him."

Phil Mooney flicked his set on again and repeated carefully, "Calling Oneonta Spaceport. Phil Mooney Outbound Luna, Calling Oneonta Spaceport. Come in Oneonta."

*Calling Phil Mooney. Calling Phil Mooney. Oneonta Spaceport Calling Phil Mooney. Come in Mooney.*

He cast a quick glance back at the child, strapped carefully in the metal bunk. She was unconscious now, possibly as a result of the acceleration in leaving Luna. He'd had to reach a speed of approximately two miles per second to escape Earth's satellite, and that had called for more G's acceleration than Lillian's sick body could bear. His lips thinned back over his teeth; it would be even worse when they came in for landing and he had to brake against Earth's gravity.

He switched on the set again to give it another try. Instructions were to contact the spaceport at which you planned to land as soon as possible. There was plenty of time, of course, but the sooner the better.

He said, "Calling Oneonta Spaceport. This is Phil Mooney, Luna, Calling Oneonta. Come in Oneonta."

*Calling Phil Mooney. Calling Phil Mooney. Oneonta Spaceport Calling Phil Mooney. Come in Mooney.*

Ed Kerry came back to the city room with a sheet of yellow paper that he'd torn



*The little ship bulleted down toward Oneonta Spaceport . . .*

off the radiotype.

He said, "Here it is, Jake. This kid—her name is Lillian Marshall—is the only survivor of an explosion at that nuclear-fission laboratory they had on the dark side. Her old man and her mother were working under this Professor Deems; both of them killed."

His eyes went on scanning the story. "Evidently this Phil Mooney runs an unscheduled spaceline. Anyway, he blasted off to rush the kid to an earth hospital."

Jake took the dispatch and scowled at it. "Kerry," he growled, "see what we got on this Phil Mooney in the morgue." He rubbed the end of his nose thoughtfully. "They'll probably pick him up all right when he gets nearer."

Somebody on rewrite said, "It doesn't make any difference how far he is; they should be able to reach him even if he was halfway to Mars. Something's wrong with his set."

He decided to try one of the other spaceports. As a matter of fact, it made very little difference at which of them he landed. There'd be suitable hospital facilities within reasonable distance of any spaceport. He was three days out now, and, according to spaceways custom, had to let them know he was coming in. It wasn't like landing an airplane—they want plenty of time to prepare for a spacecraft's arrival.

He said, "Calling New Albuquerque Spaceport. Calling New Albuquerque Spaceport. Phil Mooney, Luna, Calling New Albuquerque. Please come in New Albuquerque."

*Calling Phil Mooney. Calling Phil Mooney. New Albuquerque Spaceport Calling Phil Mooney. We are receiving you perfectly. Come in Mooney.*

He tried once more.

"Calling New Albuquerque Spaceport. Calling New Albuquerque Spaceport. Please come in New Albuquerque. Emergency. Repeat Emergency. Please come in New Albuquerque."

*Calling Phil Mooney. Calling Phil Mooney. We are receiving you perfectly, Mooney. Come in Mooney.*

Kitty Kildare took up her notes and prepared to make her way back to her own tiny office.

"I've got it, Jake," she said breathlessly. Kitty was always breathless over any story carrying more pathos than a basketball score. "My column tomorrow'll have them melting. Actually, I mean."

Jake shuddered inwardly after she left.

Ed Kerry came up and drooped on the edge of the desk.

"Here's the dope on this Phil Mooney, Jake," he said. "He's about thirty. Was in the last war and saw action when we had our space-forces storming New Petrograd. Did some fighting around the satellites, too. Piloted a one seater, got a couple of medals, but never really made big news."

"Got any pix of him?"

Ed Kelly shook his head. "Like I said, he never really made the big news. Just one more of these young fellas that saw plenty of action and when the war was over was too keyed up to settle down to everyday life."

Jake picked up the thin folder and rifled through the few clippings there. "What's he doing now?" he growled.

"Evidently when the war ended he got one of these surplus freighters and converted it. Name of his company is Mooney Space Service; sounds impressive, but he's the only one in it. Probably going broke; most of those guys are—can't make the grade against the competition of Terra-Luna Spaceways and the other big boys with the scheduled flights."

The city editor scratched the end of his nose speculatively. "Maybe we ought to have Jim do up an editorial on these unscheduled spacelines. Something along the line of how heroic some of these guys are; that sort of stuff. Do up the idea that they're always ready, fair weather or foul, to make an emergency trip . . ."

Kerry said, "There isn't any weather, fair or foul, in space."

Jake scowled at him. "You know what I mean, wise guy. Meanwhile, get some statements from some authorities."

Ed Kerry said painfully, "What statements from what authorities?"

The city editor glared at him. "So help me, Ed. I'm going to stick you on obit-

uaries. *Any* statements from *any* authorities. You know damn well what I mean. Get some doctor to beef about the fact there aren't suitable hospitalization facilities on Luna. Get some president of one of these unscheduled spacelines to sound off about what a hero Mooney is and how much good these unscheduled spacelines are—and that reminds me of something—”

He yelled to a tall lanky reporter at the far end of the city room: “Hey, Ted. Get Bunny on the line up in Oneonta and tell her I said to look up some of these unscheduled spacelines guys and see if she can get a photograph of Phil Mooney from them. Maybe he's got some buddies in Oneonta.”

There was one thing about being in free fall. You had lots of time to sit and think. Too much time, perhaps.

You had the time to think it *all* over. And over and over again.

There was the war which had torn you from the routine into which life had settled, from friends and relations and sweethearts, and thrown you into a one man space-fighter in which you sometimes stayed for weeks on end without communication with anyone, friend or foe.

There had probably been no equivalent situation in the history of past warfare to the one man space-scouts. The nearest thing to them might have been the flyers of 1914, in the first World War—but, of course, they were up there alone only for hours at a time, not weeks.

“You develop self-reliance, men,” was the way the colonel had put it. “You develop self-reliance, or you're sunk.”

“You're in space by yourself, alone. You can't use your radio or they can locate you. If something happens, some emergency, or some contact with the enemy, you're on your own. *You* have to figure it out; there's no superior officer to do your thinking; you're the whole works.”

And the colonel had been right, of course. It was a matter of using your own wits, your own ability. Fighting in a space-scout was the work of an *individual*, not of a team. Perhaps it would

be different someday in the future when machines and instruments had been developed further; but now it was an individualistic game, each man for himself.

And probably it was because of this training that he, Phil Mooney, was unable to get back into the crowd after the war had ended. He was an individualist who rebelled against working not only *for* but even *with* someone else.

He should have known better. Industry had reached beyond the point where one man goes out by himself and makes a fortune—or even a living, he thought wryly. It's the day of the *big* concerns, of tremendous trusts and cartels, who didn't even have to bother with the task of squeezing out tiny competitors like himself. He was out before he started.

The *Mooney Space Service*. He snorted in self deprecation.

Oh, well.

He pulled himself erect and made his way to the bunk. The kid was awake. He grinned down at her and said. “How's it going, Lillian?”

Her eyes seemed glazed, even worse than they'd been yesterday, but she tried to smile back at him. “All right,” she whispered, her child's voice so low he could hardly make it out. “Where's mother . . .”

Phil Mooney held a finger to his lips. “Maybe you'd better not talk too much, Lillian. Your mother and father are . . . they're all right. The thing now is to get you to the hospital and make you well again. Understand?”

Kitty Kildare was saying indignantly, “What's this about no insurance on Luna?”

“Use your head, Kitty,” Jake grunted. “What company'd be crazy enough to insure anybody working on Luna? By the way, that was a good piece on Mooney and the Marshall kid.”

“Did you read it?” Kitty Kildare was pleased.

He shuddered. “No, But the letters have been pouring in. Maybe you ought to do another. Take it from some other angle this time.”

“That's why I wanted to know about the insurance. Do you realize that this

child, this poor, sick, defenseless child, is penniless? Actually, I mean. Bad enough that her parents have left her an orphan, but, Jake, that child is penniless."

"All right, all right," he told her, "work on that for tomorrow's column."

Ed came up with another radiotype report, just as Kitty was leaving. "This guy Mooney's calling all the other spaceports now, Jake. Evidently he's getting desperate; he's only two days out. And by the way, here's a new angle. This guy Harry Marshall, the kid's father, was a war-time buddy of Phil Mooney; they went to cadet school or something together."

Jake growled thoughtfully, "He hasn't got a chance, but it makes a tremendous story. Get somebody to rig up a set in the radiotype room, Ed, and we'll see if we can listen in."

There was a desperate, tense, taut inflection in his voice now.

"Calling New Albuquerque Spaceport or Oneonta Spaceport. Phil Mooney calling any Earth spaceport. Phil Mooney Calling Oneonta, New Albuquerque, Casablanca, Mukden, any Earth spaceport. Emergency. Emergency. Request landing. Instructions. Have Lillian Marshall, eight years old, needing immediate medical care, aboard. Please come in any Earth Spaceport."

*Calling Phil Mooney. New Albuquerque calling Phil Mooney. Ambulance waiting on grounds. Receiving you perfectly. Come in . . .*

*Calling Phil Mooney. Casablanca Spaceport Calling Phil . . .*

*Calling Phil Mooney. Mukden Spaceport Calling . . .*

*Calling Phil Mooney. Oneonta Spaceport Calling Phil Mooney . . .*

Ed Kerry looked up over the set in the radiotype room at the city editor. He wet his lips carefully and said, "He's only got one day now. They've got to pick him up in hours or he's sunk."

Jake said, "I never did understand how that works. Why can't he land himself? I know he can't, but why?"

The reporter shrugged. "I don't quite get it either, but evidently the whole operation is pretty delicate stuff. They bring

him down with radar, somehow or other. It's not like landing an airplane. Landing a spacecraft is done from the ground up—not from the spacecraft down. The pilot has comparatively little to do about it. At least, that's the way it is with nine ships out of ten."

The set began to blare again, and they both listened tensely. It was Phil Mooney.

"Listen, you guys down there. If you're sitting around playing craps or something, I'm going to have a few necks to break when I get down."

The two newspapermen stared at each other over the set. Ed Kerry ran his tongue over his lips again.

The strained tone had gone from the voice of the spacepilot now and had been replaced by one of hopelessness. He said, "I don't know who I think I'm kidding. I know darn well that something's wrong with my receiver and I can't find out what it is. Maybe my sender is off too, for all I know. All I can pick up is some girl singing something about white roses. White roses, yet! I want landing instructions and I get white roses."

Ed Kerry jerked his head up and snapped, "Holy jumping hell, he's able to pick some commercial station!"

Jake came to his feet, stuck his neck out of the door and yelled at the top of his voice, "Phil Mooney is receiving some commercial station! Some dame singing something about white roses! Check every station in the city! Find out if any of them are broadcasting some dame singing about white roses."

*Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt this program for an emergency situation. Undoubtedly, you have heard on your newscasts and have read in your papers of the tragic case of Lillian Marshall, child victim of an atomic explosion on Luna which orphaned her and necessitated her immediate flight to an Earth hospital.*

*For the past three days the spacecraft carrying her, piloted by war hero Philip Mooney, has been having trouble with its radio. Due to circumstances surrounding landing of spacecraft, the two have been given up as lost in spite of the fact that almost hourly it has been possible to re-*

ceive messages from Mooney.

It is now revealed that he is able to pick up this program on the Interplanetary Broadcasting System network. We are not sure which of the nearly two thousand stations of our system he is receiving, but we will now attempt to reach Phillip Mooney with relayed messages from the Oneonta Spaceport where expert medical care is awaiting little Lillian Marshall.

Come in Oneonta.

Calling Phil Mooney. Calling Phil Mooney. Come in, Phil. This is Oneonta Spaceport, relaying through the Interplanetary Broadcasting System. Come in, Phil.

"Phil Mooney, calling Oneonta. I'm getting you, Oneonta. Come in, Oneonta. Over."

Okay, Phil. Now this is it. We should have had you two hours ago, but we'll make out all right. Your velocity is a little too high. Give it six more units on your Kingston valves. Get that? Over.

"Got it. Six more units on the Kingstons. Over."

All right now. Switch on your remote control, Phil. We'll take it from here. Stand by the coordinators . . .

IT WAS NIGHT, but a blaze of lights illuminated the Oneonta Spaceport. Hundreds of landcars stood on the parking lots, thousands of persons crowded the wire fence which kept all but port personnel from the field itself.

The old space-freighter sank easily to the apron and in seconds the rocket flames died. A surge of humanity ebbed over the field toward the craft.

Phil Mooney opened the pilot-compartment's hatch and stuck his head out, blinking in surprise at the mob beneath him.

"I don't know what this is—all about," he began, "but I've got a sick kid aboard. There's supposed to be an ambulance . . ."

Police wedged through the crowd, conveying a white-haired, white-jacketed man. He called up to the spacepilot, "We won't need an ambulance, Mr. Mooney. I've already made arrangements for facilities here at the airport for immediate treatment."

Phil Mooney made his way to the ground

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and scowled, still obviously startled by the swelling crowd.

"Who in *hert* are you?" he asked.

The other motioned for two assistants to enter the ship and bring out the child. "I'm Doctor Kern," he said. "I'll see . . ."

"Doctor Adrian Kern, the radiation expert?" The pilot frowned worriedly. "See here, doctor, the Marshalls were friends of mine, and I've taken over the care of little Lillian, but I'm—well, I'm afraid I couldn't afford to pay you . . . I mean . . ."

The famous doctor smiled at him. "I've been retained by the Interplanetary Golden Heart, Phil. You needn't worry about my fee. Besides," and he smiled easily, "I'm not going to accept any fee for this case. You see, I was listening to Marsha Malloy singing 'Love of White Roses' when your call came through. I believe it was the most poignant experience I have ever been through."

A girl next to the doctor gushed, "I'm Bunny Davis, Mr. Mooney. The managing editor of our newspaper chain has authorized me to buy your story for five thousand. If you'll just—"

Phil Mooney blinked. "I—I—"

A heavy-set man in a business suit grasped his hand and shook it with fervor, while flashbulbs went off blindingly. "Phil," he said huskily, as though moved by deep emotion, "as president of the board of directors of Terra-Luna Spaceways, I wish to take this opportunity to offer you a full—"

"Hey! Give us a smile, Phil," a man on top of a television truck yelled . . .

He was headed back for Luna the next day.

They'd been indignant, of course. There was Hollywood, and the television networks, and that Terra-Luna Spaceways guy who wanted to get in on all the publicity by offering him a vice-presidency. And the newspaper editors, and the magazine editors, and all the rest of them.

Approximately a billion persons had been tuned in to the Interplanetary network when the emergency landing instructions had been broadcast to him through that system. A billion persons had sat on

the edge of their chairs, tensely, as his ship had been brought in.

He and little Lillian had received more publicity in the past twenty-four hours than anyone since Lindberg.

And the child would be all right now. Before he'd left, checks totaling over a quarter of a million had come in for her. Donations from all over the Earth and from Mars and Venus and even some from the Jupiter satellites.

And offers of adoption. Thousands of them, from rich and poor—even including Marsha Malloy, the video star who'd been singing that song, "Love of White Roses."

Yes, Lillian would be all right. He wouldn't have been able to pay for the medical care she'd needed; but now she had the most capable experts on Earth at her disposal.

They had been indignant when he blasted off again for Luna. They'd wanted to make a hero of him. This leaving on his part they interpreted as modesty—which, come to think of it, would make him all the more of a hero.

Phil Mooney slipped a hand down to his set and flicked it on. He dialed over a dozen different stations. The news programs were all full of him and of Lillian. You'd think, to hear them, that he was the noblest, the most daring, the greatest man since Alexander the Great.

He grinned wryly. One of the reasons he'd been so anxious to leave was to get away before somebody thought to check his set to see what was wrong with it. Why, if anybody had found that it was actually in perfect shape, they'd probably have lynched him.

Yeah. The colonel had been right. In the space-forces you learned to be self-reliant. When you got in a bad spot, you figured it out yourself. You're on your own; it's you against everything and everybody. Anything goes.

His grin broadened. Maybe he wasn't a hero—the way they were all painting him; but at least Lillian was all right now, and no longer penniless the way her parents' death had left her.

—And he wasn't doing so badly himself.

As madness stalked the sub-space liner, *Telemachus*, as terror howled from Star-Deck to tubes with its bloody spawn of death, First Mate Dirk Phillips knew that the impossible was happening—piracy along the Long Arc!



The crazed mob surged toward the levitator shafts . . .

## BLACKOUT IN CYGNI

THE MAIN LIGHTS ON D-DECK were out when Dirk Phillips came off watch, and only the dim glo-pups whiled away their half-lives behind the moldings above. Far down in the bowels of the *Telemachus* the geotrons purred, a deep, sonorous sound, somehow vaguely comforting.

by  
JAMES BLISH

Dirk was not comforted. Things were too quiet, and too much hell was waiting to pop somewhere along the Long Arc. Down the corridor the blank doors of the deluxe suites regarded him, and from behind one of them came a muffled feminine giggle. Dirk scowled and increased his pace. The empty-headed whinny followed him as he rounded a corner.

*You'll giggle out of the other side of your mouth if you get in Jason's hands, you damned parasite!*

Dirk hated the passengers on D-Deck on principle. They were his charges, but no more so than the thousand Centaurian laborers and their families packed into the cubicles down in Supercargo—pioneers, bound for a world that hadn't even been named yet: 61 Cygni C-II. These gilded loungers topside were the spectators, the pleasure-palace builders, the representatives of the big power and mining cartels . . . people who could pay two thousand credits for a D-Deck suite only because of the sweating of people like the ones below.

It would be nice, Dirk reflected idly, if the *Telemachus* could be split horizontally up her middle, sending the Centaureans on to their epochal job of establishing Earth's second interstellar colony—and leaving the top two decks behind, floundering in subspace, waiting for the man who called himself Jason. Or perhaps to let Jason himself pick over the moneyed cream for ransom—no, that wouldn't work. Jason would simply pitch the poorer people out the airlocks, for they had no one back home who might pay ransom for them; that was S.O.P. with Jason.

Voices murmured ahead of him. He stepped over the low doorway into the Star Deck: the big bubble forward of center, on the midline of the ship. It was an odd hour for anyone to be looking at the scenery; but then, few passengers ever got oriented to the twenty-hour Ship's Day. Third Watch might be sleepy-time for Dirk, but for a passenger it might just as easily be the equivalent of 9:30 A. M. Earth time, or 14:50 Centaurian.

He recognized one of the figures at once—Jerry Sanders, the *Telemachus'* new Third Mate. There was a girl with him, and a stocky, broad-shouldered man in

civvies. The man saw Dirk at the same time and gestured.

"There's another officer—maybe he knows. I say, Commodore."

**F**OR A MOMENT Dirk was tempted to go on without answering. Among the people on D-Deck whom he would cheerfully dunk in boiling wine, those who hailed him as if he were a bell-hop were high on the list. However, he couldn't pretend that he hadn't heard the summons—it had rung like a tocsin through the big dome—and rank discourtesy to a passenger would be out of character. Grudgingly he swerved and walked over to the little group.

"What can I do for you?" he said mildly.

"Couple of questions," the heavy man said, with bluff heartiness. "Mr. Sanders here can't seem to make them quite clear. We're on overdrive now, aren't we?"

"Certainly. You can hear the geotrons."

"Aha, that's what I said. Now then: how does it happen that things don't look any different?" He gestured through the clear stellite, including the whole universe in his category of "things." "Shouldn't there be warping, or something?"

"There is," Dirk said, a little stiffly. "But it takes some knowledge of the stars to recognize it. Had you been up here when overdrive first went on, you'd have seen the starfield scramble itself thoroughly."

"But shouldn't there be some color-changes, too?"

"Yes and no. You're not seeing by light, you know. You're looking at what might be called the backsides of the stars—not the components which exist in free space, but the considerable masses of their cores which are extruded into subspace."

"Rather disappointing," the big man said. "I expected something more, ah, unusual."

"Such as the 'nameless hues' the 'vision writers prate about? Well, those hues are probably there—but your eyes can't see them. That's why they're nameless; they don't need names."

The big man laughed. "That settles me," he said jovially. "Eh, Nadya? If some of the scripters back home could hear their boss told off like that—"

Dirk stiffened momentarily. Their boss! There was only one man on Earth or Centaurus who could call himself that. This burly bird must be James Henry Stapledon, king-pin of the visicast networks of two systems. Evidently he was on his way to extend his empire over a third. The girl was probably his secretary—

Dirk became aware suddenly that the girl was watching him with dark-eyed amusement. He swung angrily on Jerry.

"Mr. Sanders, aren't you aware that the next watch is yours? If we run into any trouble, you'll wish you'd had your sleep."

Sanders flushed. "My off-watch time's my own."

"Oh, come now, don't be hard on the lad," Stapledon protested. "He's here at my request. Anyhow, what trouble could we encounter out here?"

The questions seemed rhetorical; surely the 'vision magnate knew all there was to know about Jason. "Knock off, Jerry," Dirk said. "You've got four hours left to go, and I don't relish the idea of a shaky hand at the boards up front."

"Yessir," Sanders said sullenly. It was obvious that he hated to be ordered to bed in front of the girl, but he had no choice. Dirk watched him until his slender back was framed against the glo-pup shimmer in the levitator shaft; then he turned to the two passengers.

"Sorry," he said. "But we're a little on edge this trip. There's a lot at stake. If Jason's greed stops this third wave of colonization, there may never be another; we can't any of us afford a moment's inattention."

"Quite right, quite right," Stapledon said. "We appreciate the attention, Commodore. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Dirk said through suddenly clenched teeth. He turned his back on them and strode off. Just as he was entering the shaft, the girl laughed. The silvery sound cascaded through the dome. He felt himself flushing and cut off the shaft at B-Deck,

IT HAD BEEN nearly a century since the first interstellar passenger liner had turned back toward Earth, only a quarter of the way along toward Centaurus III, with a cargo of madness and death.

It had happened, according to the few surviving crewmen, when the lights had been turned off for the second Watch. Dozens of learned tomes had been written about it since then, but no-one had ever gotten much beyond the simple facts: the lights had gone off, and the passengers had rioted. There was something about being driven between the stars at nine times the speed of light which was different from ordinary interplanetary flight: in a lightless cabin the darkness closed in, you were horribly, uniquely alone, pitching headlong into a pit of absolute emptiness . . .

Perhaps—just perhaps—that was the way it was. Those who had come sane through the first blackout could not be sure; they had been lucky enough to be on duty, near a source of light. Those who had been in the cabins had gone mad within a few moments.

After that, the switchless, inextinguishable glo-pups had been installed by Act of Council, and the General Orders on Blackouts had become a part of the Spaceways Manual. There was even a glo-pup at the head of every bed, next to the visitape screen, casting its dim radiance up toward the ceiling. On the ledge next to the pillow there was also a mask for the glo-pup, but most of the masks gathered dust.

Dirk stripped off his jacket, took off his shoes and socks, and put the mask over the light. He was as afraid of the interstellar pit as any spaceman, but he had sense enough to know that half his fear was of something he knew to be harmless while he was alone: the fear of what other people might do while he could not see them. On this flight, there was no telling who or what might be watching wherever there was light . . .

In the stifling darkness he groped to his locker and spun the combination, working with fingers which had often conquered tougher puzzles than an ordinary baggage locker. Inside, behind his gaudy dress-jacket, was a worn holster with a

heavy cyclast in it. It was a tough starman's boast that he slept in the dark, and the man who was telling the truth had little to fear from marauders—it took something more than guts to walk into a totally black room out here—but Dirk slept with the cyclast all the same. There was no telling what was due to happen this trip—

His fingers found the holster. The heat-stained, familiar weapon was gone.

The shock of surprise was doubled and redoubled in the boundless gloom. Fighting down his panic, he ran quick fingers through his jacket, along the floor of the locker. Gone, all right. Of course it was illegal for an officer to maintain arms outside the ship's arsenal, but nobody on the bridge had any reason to be pawing through Dirk's effects—

Sanders?

Ridiculous. Dirk had hardly spoken to Sanders until tonight. The fledgling resentment the Third Mate might have felt at being packed off to his crib couldn't have taken wing this quickly.

There was only one answer. There was someone on board the *Telemachus* who was an agent of Jason.

Dirk padded back to his bunk and sat down, rubbing the blond stubble on his chin. It fitted; almost it seemed as if it fitted too patly to be true. After the Centrale-Ganymede war, some units of the Ganymedian Navy had been sold as surplus to private firms, before the Centrale Council could get a complete inventory of what it had won. Among the sold ships had been several heavy sub-cruisers. The man who called himself Jason had somehow had the liquid cash to buy one; he'd turned it to piracy, and had made a good thing of intercepting the big, clumsy liners on the interstellar run—

Except that a ship on overdrive was supposed to be undetectable. Every physicist in the system swore that it was impossible to pirate a sub-ship, no matter how big it was. So the obvious conclusion was that the piracies had been inside jobs; and the theft of Dirk's cyclast, on this trip of all trips, seemed to point the same way. Disgustedly, he reached for the glc-pup mask.

A SOFT KNOCK on the cabin door arrested his hand in mid-air. There was a kangaroo-shiv in the belt of his dress jacket; but it was a duelling weapon, and he decided against fighting over trifles.

"Yes?" he said.

The door opened hesitantly. It was the girl. Modeled against the hazy glow, she was startlingly lovely. She peered helplessly into the unexpected darkness, one hand at her throat, one smooth knee bent.

"Mr. Phillips?"

Dirk's hand resumed its arrested arc, and the glo-pup once more stared innocently at the ceiling. He leaned on one elbow and studied his visitor. He'd hardly gotten a glance at her before—and she was something to look at.

Her hair was a waterfall of black silk, with blue highlights in it, and her eyes were violet and slightly slanted—not enough to suggest the Oriental, yet giving her face a piquancy that was hard to resist. The fashionable Centaurian toga, with its slit from waist to toe and its heavy golden shiv-chain, locking the waist, wouldn't have been tolerated on tabu-ridden Earth—but then, there were few women left on Earth who could wear such clothing successfully. The active, lithe-bodied people who roamed the interstellar frontier were almost a different race. Dirk noticed wryly that the shiv-chain wasn't empty; the massive handle of the weapon itself lay across one gently rounded hip.

"That's me," he said, somewhat belatedly. Then, "You're armed."

The girl bit her lip and reached for the clasp of the golden chain. Dirk raised his hand quickly.

"Please don't. Those damned togas look like nightgowns when they're unbound, and I'm not sure I could stand the shock. What do you want?"

"May I close the door?" she said stiffly.

"It's your reputation, not mine. Get on with it. Sanders may want to lose sleep off watch, but I don't."

"You're very gracious," she said. She shut the door and leaned against it, her hands behind her back. "I'm Nadya Storm."

Dirk's eyebrows shot up. "I wish I'd

had a chance to look at the passenger list! First Stapledon—and now the daughter of Kurt Storm, top Centrale Council woodenhead! And to think I took you for a Centaurian. I should have known better.”

“Oh?” Nadya said coldly. “Why?”

“Because the real Centaureans are down in Supercargo—not lolling around on D-Deck at two thousand per.”

She shrugged. “I’m going to Cygni for the same reason they are—to work. I’m covering the colonization for ITN; the D-Deck rooms were Mr. Stapledon’s idea . . . but that doesn’t matter. You seem to be spoiling for a fight. If you can’t stop fencing, I’ll take my questions to Captain Muir.”

“You’ll get short shrift there, Stapledon notwithstanding, I promise you.” But Dirk relaxed a little. It was hard not to be curious over what had brought her here at this hour, and harder still to resist the sheer beauty of her. “Well, maybe I have been a bit brusque. But the Long Arc is a dangerous one, and I haven’t had much time for polishing up my manners. Go ahead.”

**S**HE STRAIGHTENED, with an impossibly graceful, flowing motion, and walked over to the single chair, her slim legs kicking the toga into a swirl about her knees. “Why is it so dangerous?” she said. “This Jason, whoever he is, has worked out a way to pirate an overdrive ship. But surely it would be possible to give merchant vessels an escort—or even to arm them. We did both during the war.”

“Sure, it’s possible. The *Telemachus* is armed—you didn’t know that? Well, she is; you can’t see it from Star Deck, but there’s a turret with two synchrons in it under the ship’s belly, and murder-guns—pom-poms—all along her periphery. But during the war those guns were manned by Patrol crews who knew their business. Now the Patrol’s being demobbed, and if we get into trouble we’ll have to put ordinary merchant ratings into the turret. Our gunnery officer’s a good man, but he can’t be in the turret and on the bridge at the same time. As for a convoy—you should know more about that than I do.”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be asking.”

“Your father and his egg-headed young crony Paul Haagen were the first Councilmen to call for eternal peace and prosperity—and the reduction of the Patrol to a fifth of its normal strength. The Patrol has its hands full now just enforcing the Spaceways Act in the System, let alone having monitors to spare this far out.”

He saw her delicate eyebrows arch in puzzlement, and added, “This Jason has a demobbed Ganymedian cruiser. A screen of smaller vessels wouldn’t do us a bit of good; he could immobilize them by threatening to blast us the minute the others fired on him. It takes a bigger vessel than a heavy to beat a heavy to the punch; a battleplane will do, but a monitor’s better.”

“But monitors are *too* big to use except outside the asteroids. Surely there must be some to spare out here.”

Dirk laughed. “Sure. But there’s a mass limit on overdrive. The liners are just under that limit. Monitors are ’way over it. With a monitor escort, it’d take us about 11.02 years to get to 61 Cygni from Centaurus, with everybody sick from acceleration pressure most of the time.”

The girl frowned and was silent. Dirk said, “May I ask some questions?”

“Why not?”

“Why do you want to know all this?”

“I’m a ’vision announcer, as I said,” Nadya replied abstractedly. “We’re going to do a take on the first landing, and I wanted details about the dangers of the trip. I’m not sure I can use much of this, though—the political element is touchy . . .”

“Why do you carry a shiv?” Dirk asked suddenly.

“It’s fashionable,” she said. Abruptly she came out of her study. She stood up, swung to the door, and stepped out into the corridor. At the last instant she looked back at him and smiled.

“Mine,” she said, “has a propelling charge in it.”

The next instant she was gone, leaving Dirk with his jaw hanging. The smile had been gorgeous, but that final speech certainly didn’t go with it. He’d been pumped, outthought, and shivved where it counted. He had half a mind to drag the girl back

in again and demand an accounting—

A sudden, choking pall of darkness dropped over his head and shoulders, cutting the thought off. It took him nearly a second to accept what had happened.

*The glo-pup had gone out!*

**I**N THE THICK BLACKNESS, Dirk churned his way to the locker and into the dress blouse. The shiv, at least, was still in it. He zipped the heavy cloth closed with nervous fingers and jerked the blouse roughly into order. The shoes could sit where they were—whatever had happened, the silence of bare feet might be useful.

It was anything but silent in the corridor. The deck shuddered to the running of scores of feet, and doors banged in their slots. There were shouts and frantic scramblings and scattered screams. The glo-pups were out in the corridor, too; probably all over the ship. It was impossible, but they were out.

Blackout!

Someone thudded into Dirk's shoulder and grabbed at him. Hands locked around his throat, heavy shoes kicked at his shins. He balled one fist over the other and drove his arms up with all his strength—

The man hanging onto him howled and tumbled backwards. Grimly Dirk ploughed through the struggling mob. Thirty meters ahead there was a companionway to the bow—if he could reach it. He wondered if Nadya had managed to reach her cabin before—

*Btsüürrrrrrrrrrrr!*

He threw himself flat against the cold metal of the deck. The shiv ricocheted and went racking down the corridor, yowling blue murder. Someone stepped on Dirk's right hand, hard.

Someone was lying next to him. He dug his bare toes against the metal and tried to swim away from under the trampling feet. A small, wiry hand dug into his biceps.

"Lie still!" Nadya's voice hissed. "Or I'll put a shiv in your kidneys—"

Dirk didn't stop to bow from the waist; not exactly, anyhow. He doubled himself up suddenly, catching the girl a sickening blow in the solar plexus. Then he caught the suddenly-relaxed hand on his arm and

dragged her after him. If he could get them both over against the wall—

Somehow, he made it. His captive was beginning to struggle again. He took her by the hair and dragged her ear over against his mouth.

"Stop it," he growled. The girl bucked once, but the cruel blow Dirk had dealt her had taken its toll. "It's me—Phillips. This is a Blackout; there's worse to come. Don't attract any attention."

He locked his free arm about her. Under them, the deck shuddered spasmodically. A second later the wild howling of the General Alarm rang through the tubes. Dirk's lips skinned back from his teeth. Leave it to Muir! Nothing like a siren to pile madness on top of madness!

The mob surged toward the levitator shafts, every last man trying to claw up to Star Deck where there was at least an illusion of open spaces. After several eternities, B-Deck was quiet, except for a hopeless moaning somewhere astern. Dirk loosened his hold on the girl.

"All right," he said. "Let's go—and make it fast."

"I'm quite all right, she said angrily. "No thanks to you and your educated knees. If you'll let go of me I'll go to my cabin."

"You little fool, D-Deck is a madhouse now. Everyone's trying to jam up there. The only safe place in this whole ship is on the bridge. Travel!"

He drove her forward to the stairwell at the *Telemachus*' nose. There was a light there, and Dirk felt a vague shame at the surge of relief that went through him when he saw it. Two of the crewmen were high up in the well, heat-rifles at the ready; and the beam of a dismounted landing-light poured down the shaft. As Dirk propelled the girl into the column of light, both rifles snapped up.

"Ahoy, up there!" he called. "At ease. This is First Mate Phillips."

The flared muzzles did not waver. "We know who you are," one of the spacemen said. "Point is, are you potty?"

"Nah, he ain't potty," the other one said. "He *sleeps* in the dark, ain't you heard? Come on up, sir."

Dirk went up the winding ladder, sup-

porting the exhausted girl. At the port which let out onto Star Deck a red-headed little man in civvies crouched with his back to the well, a tape-ike jammed through the Judas. He was cursing exultantly. Dirk stopped and stared at him.

"Hey, you—"

"It's Johnny Hask," Nadya said. "Cameraman. Johnny—"

The red-head waved them both away with his free hand. "Don't muss me up," he said. "Don't muss, see? What a picture! Two Thousand Passengers Riot in Interstellar Void! Terror On the Long Arc! What a picture! Go 'way, Nadya, you'll get your crack at it when we dub in the commentary."

Dirk grinned. However the little 'vision man had gotten here, he was obviously having the time of his life. He took the girl's arm again.

ON THE BRIDGE, Muir was jabbing at the power-boards and roaring anathemas at chicken-livers who were afraid of a little darkness. The glow of a jury-rigged ethon-tube gleamed on his bald head. The navigator's desk was empty; Dirk let the girl slump into the empty seat and yanked the G. A. switch out of its blades. The siren wow-wowed away into silence like a damned soul dwindling into hell.

"What the—!" Muir bellowed. Then, "Oh, it's you, Phillips! Get me an orbit check, fast, and cut that alarm in again!"

Dirk fed tape into the big integrator. "I'd advise against the alarm, sir. Everybody's at stations that can get to them in this ink. The siren just doubles the terror among the passengers."

"The passengers!" Muir looked stunned, as if the passengers were things he had forgotten until now. "They should have been gassed ten minutes ago."

Dirk automatically grabbed for his nose. The filters weren't there; he'd actually forgotten them—there'd been no gas! "That damned Sanders—"

"Here, sir," the Third Mate's voice said. He came through the D-Deck hatch, with Stapledon, the 'vision boss, at his heels. Both of them looked considerably mussed up.

"What is this, a game?" Muir said. "A fine bunch of officers Interstellar gives me—too busy rescuing their favorite civilians to remember their General Orders. I suppose you wouldn't pull the gas 'til you had this man on the bridge, eh?"

"No, sir," Sanders said, swallowing. "I mean, yes, sir, I did. But nothing happened. I pulled toggles at every station from my cabin to here, and didn't get any gas."

"Eh? No gas, no lights—I hope to Heaven we've got power! Phillips?"

"We're still on course, sir," Dirk said.

"All right. Sanders, get a party and run down the trouble in the main lighting lines." The Captain's blunt hands reached for the geotron cutout. At the same instant, Dirk hurled himself from the integrator in a flying tackle.

Muir came down with a heavy thud, but he struck fighting. He was a big man, and a hard one. It was like trying to wrestle a lion. Somehow he got one foot planted in Dirk's chest and heaved, his thigh-muscles knotting under his tight uniform. Dirk felt himself flying. A second later he smashed into the far wall and Muir had a shiv pointed at his middle.

"Now then, Mr. Phillips," Muir said, breathing heavily. "Since you're the big, brave man who sleeps in the dark, we can't assume that you've got the madness. Explain yourself, and make it good."

Dirk fought for breath. Nadya was watching him with wide, terrified eyes. Sanders had snatched a heat-rifle from the rack, and was hefting it uncertainly.

"The geotrons," Dirk gasped. "Don't cut them—"

"And why not, Mister? You know the General Orders on Blackouts—gas the passengers, cut the overdrive, send out visicarrier SOS—my God, we've had that stuff pounded into us ever since we were oilers."

"This is different. Jason's in the vicinity."

The shiv did not move. "Jason!" Muir said. "If he's around, overdrive won't do us any good. I'd sooner be in free space where I could maneuver." He picked up the intercom mike. "Synchros!"

"Gunnery officer."



"Hello, Sims, I thought you'd been trampled. Battle stations. Report down the line on the murder guns."

"Begging your pardon, sir," the interphone said, "but I don't have any handlers, or any power. If you could give me a rig from the accumulators I could man-handle the turret."

Muir swore. "All right," he said. "Good boy. Build a field, quick." His blunt fingers clacked plungers, banking the accumulators into the synchrotron circuits.

"You'll never make it," Dirk said flatly. "The pom-poms are pea-shooters even if you do get them manned, and Sims can't beat a cruiser to the draw without handlers. You can't fight the *Telemachus*, Captain."

"I mean to try, Mister," Muir said. "I won't surrender my ship, fat pig as she is. And if Jason is out there, you can explain to a summary court-martial how you knew about it beforehand." He grasped the big jackknife handle. The twin plungers of the overdrive switch leapt out of their sockets.

The humming of the geotrons died. In the forward viewplate the stars swirled like dustmotes in a sunbeam, changing colors with impossible rapidity, skyrocketing up into the violet, blinking out, reappearing at the red end of the spectrum and running the gamut again. It was as if a god's dream of stellar order had been broken and dispersed by some cosmic alarm-clock.

Muir watched, his fists clenching and opening. Dirk tensed for a new spring, but Sanders had the heat-rifle on him. The Third Mate was biting his lip, keeping his eyes off the plate by sheer funk. It was not pleasant to be a green officer in a space-bound madhouse . . .

Against the swirling stars, a ghostly ship formed.

THERE was a sobbing breath from Stapledon. He stumbled to the bulkhead, yanked the hatch open. It was dark beyond the hatch, but Stapledon suddenly did not appear to care. He went out, his ragged breathing merging with the surf of terrified moaning beating up from below.

The ghost ship solidified: a long, tur-

ret-knotted torpedo scarcely ten miles away. The stars scuttled affrightedly for their proper places and froze.

"Well?" Dirk said grimly.

Muir spun on him. "That's the *Argo II*, all right. And she's already got her turrets coming to bear on us." He glared at Dirk like an infuriated bear. "Talk!"

Dirk shrugged. "Simple enough, Captain. It's impossible to pirate a ship on overdrive. We have to assume that; the main body of evidence—not all of it, but most of it—points that way, and to assume the opposite is to leave ourselves without any jumping-off place."

"I didn't ask for a lesson in logic, Mister!"

"Consequently," Dirk said evenly, "it followed that the liners Jason pirated *were* in free space—not on overdrive. Why? What reason could a liner have for cutting overdrive?"

"They had a Blackout?" Sanders whispered.

"Yes. They cut their geotrons as the General Orders require. Jason evidently knew in advance when the lights would go out, and could manage to be nearby, on a matched course. Then, the moment the liner appeared in free space, his detectors spotted it, and he got there in nothing flat on his own overdrive. If the liner sent out an SOS as the Orders require, why, so much the better. It led Jason to his victim practically by the nose."

"Very pretty." Muir frowned. Obviously Dirk's sudden assault upon his authority was hard to reconcile with his view of the situation. Yet if the *Telemachus* was actually under threat of piracy—

After a long moment, he jammed his shiv back into its scabbard. "I'll have to trust you, Phillips, though God knows you could have engineered the Blackout as well as anyone else on board. But I need you to fight the ship. Put up that rifle, Mr. Sanders, and muster me some pom-pom crews."

As if in answer, twin bolts of greenish light leapt from the *Argo II's* dorsal turret. The *Telemachus* boomed like a cracked bass drum. The concussion knocked them all to the deck. The alarm siren cut in again. Muir surged to his knees and

glowered at the blinkers.

"Aft cargo hold," he said. His nose was bleeding, but he didn't look a bit funny. "Where the hell—ah!"

A ragged comb of death swept along the port side of the *Telemachus*. The murder guns—some of them, anyhow. Dirk touched Nadya's shoulder reassuringly and squeezed himself into the gunnery officer's chair. There was a chance—Jason might not have expected the liner to be in any shape to fight back—

A bright, blue-white flower burst into bloom on the *Argo II's* flank. One of the thermite-loaded pom-pom shells had found a home. With a grin of satisfaction Muir threw the *Telemachus'* helm up and over. The big ship rose clumsily on her jets.

Dirk watched his cross-hair and prayed that the lone man in the belly turret had had time to build a field. If it had been even barely possible, Sims was the man to get it done. But with no handlers—

The pirate's synchros fountained deutions again, but this time there was no answering crash. In space, the target booms, not the guns; silence meant a clean miss. The cross-hair slid toward the image of the gray cruiser. Dirk's hand tensed above the firing key—

James Henry Stapledon's voice said, "I wouldn't touch that, if I were you, Mr. Phillips."

Dirk froze. After a moment he turned his head, slowly.

Stapledon was standing in the darkness of the open hatch, smiling lazily. From behind him the dull horror of the passengers still rose and fell. Cradled in his arms was Dirk's cyclist.

**T**HE HEAVY SUB-CRUISER lay off, its guns centered watchfully on the *Telemachus*. From the boarding-launch at the liner's keel airlock, arrogant, greedy-eyed men with blasters filed along the corridors, and a few seconds later the main lights came on again. In the shambles on Star Deck, passengers looked at each other and at what they had done. Some of them wept. Some of them were beyond all tears. The rest were dead.

Jason had to bend low to get through

6—Planet Stories—July

the hatch to the bridge. He was a tall man, with the mild, weak face of a momma's darling. With him was an entity even taller than he was, a ten-foot figure with tattered ears like a mongrel dog's: a Martian.

"This," Jason said, waving his hand at the Outlander, "is my First Mate, Willie Peng. If he gives any orders in my absence, jump—or you'll bloat. Now then. Who's Captain Muir?"

"Me," Muir said disgustedly.

"Oho; the surly type. Take his shiv, Willie—and you might lighten these other heroes of their loads, too."

Stapledon shifted to keep the others in line of fire while the Martian blocked Jason's blaster. The pirate's eyes encountered the girl, and his almost-invisible eyebrows kinked.

"My dear girl!" he said. "What a shame!"

Nadya said, "Hello, Paul."

Dirk stared at them both. Paul? The raider's face *was* familiar—

"I see," he said slowly. "Paul Haagen. No wonder you were in such a hurry to demobilize the Patrol." Another thought crept unbidden into his mind. There had been another Councilman who had been strong for "letting the boys go home"—Kurt Storm, Nadya's father.

"I'm really quite sorry," Jason was saying, rather too smoothly. He did not seem to notice that Dirk existed. "I'd supposed you'd be back there, among the rabble; you could have been ransomed and no one would have been the wiser. Now—"

"Now," Nadya said, "you'll have to kill me along with the officers?"

Stapledon stirred. "I say," he protested. "Look, Paul, there's a limit. I can't continue to romanticize your exploits if you victimize my best stars—"

"Be quiet," Jason said sharply. "No, I don't think I'll do that, Nadya. Contrariwise, you can't go free. Hmm. A nice problem." The washed-out blue eyes scanned her speculatively.

"All got, chief," Willie Peng said. He threw the shivs in a corner. "Female got one, too. Rf?"

"It's ornamental; no propellant; Centaurian fashion," Jason said. Willie looked

puzzled, but his Captain's indifference was clear enough. "Muir, where's the mail stored?"

"Six paces from the nearest firing squad," Muir said. "Take a look."

"I shall. Willie, the passenger list is probably in that locker over there. You know the names to look for."

"Rf."

Dirk felt his muscles cording. The locker, unlike the baggage-safes below, had a tough five-tumbler electrolock on it. If Willie, like most Outlanders, was short on patience—

He was. He fumbled tentatively and swore in his own hoarse language. Then he turned his blaster on the lock. A blaster in a confined space kicks up quite a fuss—

Dirk threw himself forward with every erg of power he could slam into his legs. Stapledon shouted incoherently. Dirk's head butted into Jason's middle.

The pirate's clubbed blaster glanced stunningly off Dirk's left temple. The deck hit him on the forehead. He ground his teeth and fought to his knees, spitting blood. The toe of a hard-driven spaceboot crashed into his side.

On the edge of the tangle Stapledon scuttled, trying to get in position to blast Dirk and still cover Muir and Sanders. The Martian's weapon would take about eighty seconds to recharge; Willie threw it at Dirk and went around the other way. Sanders stuck a foot out and the ten-foot dog-man came down on the deck like a scarecrow. Jason kicked Dirk again and brought the muzzle of his own blaster into line—

*Ptsiirr-tchh!*

JASON dropped the blaster and grabbed at his throat. Blood cascaded down the front of his jacket. A half-inch of shiv-blade protruded from his Adam's apple; it had nearly taken his head off. Dirk retched and snatched at the weapon on the deck, but it wasn't needed. As Stapledon swung on Dirk, Muir lobbed a balled fist as big as a grapefruit into his ear. He dropped as if stoned.

That left Willie Peng. He had a clear

field, but when Dirk dropped the blaster and snatched the cyclast from the fallen 'vision magnate, Willie laid back his ears, bared his teeth, and dived under the chart table. A man will face up to a blaster or a heat-rifle, but a cyclast is something else again; nobody likes to feel his flesh running fluidly off his bones . . .

"Nice going, Nadya," Dirk gasped.

The girl was crying convulsively. "I had to do it," she sobbed. "When I think what a fool he made of Dad—and the awful thing down below—"

"Cripes," Dirk said. "We're still full up with boarders. Quick, Sanders, pull the gas—they've got the lights back on, and money says the same short was what cut the gas-toggles."

The Third Mate jumped to the wall toggle and pulled it. It cut the alarm siren in again, but for once Dirk was glad to hear it. The gas was on. Under the wailing alarm he could hear it hissing beyond the open hatch. He slammed the hatch shut.

Muir was already at the interphone. "Sims!" he roared. "You still free?"

"Yissir," the intercom said. "What the hell's going on? I've been sitting on my key for twenty minutes. Isn't anybody going to fire these damned guns?"

Muir grinned savagely. "Keep sitting." He gestured Dirk to the firing table. The single vertical cross-hair was a little to the left of the image of the *Argo II*; if Sims had his key down, it meant that his own horizontal cross-hair was still on the pirate. Muir fired a short burst from the port jets and the sub-cruiser's image began to drift.

When the vertical cross-hair split it fairly across the middle, Dirk put down the bridge key. Under the *Telemachus*' belly the synchros screamed triumphantly —

A silent burst of white-hot gas jetted away from the *Argo II*'s middle. Dirk held the key down as her image continued to drift. The cancer of destruction ate its way forward. The big cruiser jerked spasmodically, but before she could get underway the blast of deuterons reached her bridge.

One side of the *Argo VII*, just forward

of the overdrive assembly, fell away, and a lifeship clawed spaceward. Muir shook a fist at it. "Small fry," he snarled, "but I hate to see a one of 'em stay alive—"

At the nose of the *Telemachus*, a single pom-pom spouted. Some crewman had kept his head long enough to remember his nose-filters. The murder gun was coming into its own. The life-ship ran head-on into a thermit shell. After that it drifted . . .

As an afterthought, Dirk dragged Willie Peng out from under the chart table and chucked him out the hatch into the gas. "A sleeping prisoner," he said to no one in particular, "is a good prisoner."

Sanders said unsteadily, "One thing I don't get. How did Stapledon get into it?"

"Remember his editorials last year about peace and plenty?" Dirk said. "His chain supported Haagen and Storm in the demobilization campaign. And he financed Jason. He had every reason to want this colonization stopped; Earth's empire was getting too big for him. As things stood, he could sway public opinion, control Council decisions, get things played the way he wanted them. But every new star system conquered made his hold more tenuous. Jason, he hoped, would terrorize the colonists, ruin all chance of the Cygni system—or any other new system—being settled by people he couldn't manipulate."

"I can see why," Muir said. "What I want to know is *how*."

"That's easy. Stapledon was the only person who could have bollixed up the ship's circuits that way. There's a 'vision set in every room. His technies had plenty of opportunity to disconnect the gas-trips at the same time they installed the sets. And plenty of time to take out the real glo-pups—the radioactive ones,

that *never* go out—and install colored ethons instead. They were spliced onto the regular lighting circuit. When Jason wanted a Blackout, all his henchman had to do was cause a short somewhere, and blooley! What chance would we have of finding where the short was in the middle of a riot?"

He felt his kicked side tenderly. "But they had to have light to work by when they boarded us. They knew where the short was, and fixed it. The 'vision technies had had no chance to disconnect the gas toggle on the bridge, and depended on the pirates to incapacitate the bridge. When that failed, they were sunk—nobody but the Patrol knows how to make gas-proof nosepieces, and Jason couldn't steal a tenth as many as he'd need to equip his crew."

"It's no wonder Jason owned a heavy sub-cruiser. He had Stapledon behind him to put up the two million or so it took to buy the ship from Ganymede. Two million's a lot of credits, but they probably got it back in the first attack—not that the money itself interested Stapledon any. He probably let Jason keep it all."

"We figured that might be the story, but 'til now we had no proof; and the demobbing left us without enough men to put Marines aboard every ship—"

"We?" Muir said suspiciously. "Who's we?"

Dirk grinned. "Intelligence; who else? Commander John H. Dalton, at your service."

"Not," Sanders said, on cue, "not Jack Dalton of the Centrale Patrol!"

"Sir, the very same." Dirk looked at the girl. "Aren't you going to say, 'My hero'?"

She didn't, but the substitute she offered was eminently satisfactory.



# The VIRGIN of VALKARION

by POUL ANDERSON

THE SUN WAS LOW IN THE west and a thin chill wind was blowing along the hills when Alfric saw Valkarion below him. He reined in his hengist and sat for a moment scouting the terrain with the hard-learned caution of many wandering years.

Save for himself, the broad highway that flung its time-raddled length down

*Tonight, so spake the Temple  
Prophecy, a sword-scarred Out-  
lander would come riding, a  
Queen would play the tavern  
bawd, and the Thirty-ninth Dy-  
nasty should fall with the Mating  
of the Moons!*



*Alfrie jumped out and rushed at the three, his blade shrieking* ♪ ♪ ♪

the rock slope was empty. On either hand, the harsh gullied hills stretched away to the dusky horizon, wind whispering in gray scrub and low twisted trees. Here and there, evening fires glimmered red from peasants' huts, or the broken columns of temples in ruins these many thousand years loomed against the darkening greenish-blue. Behind him, the land faded toward the raw naked desert from which he had come. A falkh hovered on silent wings far above him, watching for a movement that might mean prey—otherwise he was alone.

Still—he felt uneasy. A prickling not due to the gathering cold tingled along his spine, and he had spent too much of his life in the nearness of death to ignore such warnings.

HE LOOKED AHEAD, down the great road. It twisted and swooped between the fantastically wind-carven crags, a dim white ribbon in the deepening twilight. The smooth stone blocks were cracked apart by ages so long that the thought made his head reel, and in places the harsh wiry vegetation had grown through and over it, but still the old Imperial Way was there. The ancients had built mightily.

Halfway down the huge slope of hillside, the road ran into Valkarion city. Below that level, the cliffs dropped sharply, white with old salt-streaks, to the dead sea-bottoms—a vast depression, sand and salt and thin bitter plant-growth, reaching out to the sunset horizon.

Lights were winking on in the city. It was not far, and Alfric had no wish to sleep in the open or under some peasant's stinking roof. So—why not go ahead? The city, his goal, was there, and naught to hold him from it save—

The hengist whickered and stamped its broad cloven hoofs. Its eyes rolled uneasily, and Alfric's hand slid to his sword hilt. If the beast also sensed a watchfulness—

He caught the stir in the thick brushclump out of the corner of one eye. Only a hunter would have noticed it; only a rover at once, without stopping to think, would have struck spurs into his mount. The hengist leaped, and the dart whisper-

ed past Alfric's face.

One scratch from the poisoned missile of the southern blowguns was enough to kill a man. Alfric yelled, and flung his hengist at the brush. The sword whined from its scabbard, flamed in his hand.

Two men slipped from the thicket as he crashed into it. They were of a race foreign even to these southlands, small and lithe and amber-skinned. They wore only loincloths; all hair had been shaved from their heads and bodies, and the iron slave-collars were about their necks. Vaguely, Alfric was aware of the brands on their foreheads, but at the moment he was only concerned with their weapons.

One skipped aside, raising the blowgun to his lips. Alfric yanked the javelin from its holster by his saddle and launched it left-handed—through the slave's belly and out his back.

Steel hissed beside him as the other swung with a scimitar. The hengist screamed as the blade cut its sleek gray hide. The forehoofs lashed out, the great hooked beak snapped, and the slave lay a bloody ruin on the Imperial Way.

Alfric reined in his prancing mount and looked around, breathing hard. An ambush—by the bear of Ruho, they'd meant to kill him!

But—why?

A poor solitary wanderer was no worthwhile quarry for footpads—anyway, these weren't outlaws but slaves; they must have been set here with orders to destroy some specific person. But no one in Valkarion knew Alfric—he was a stranger without friend or enemy.

Had they mistaken him for someone else? That would be hard to do even in this dim light; he was too plainly a barbarian outlander. It made no sense. By Luigur, it made no sense!

He leaned over, studying the dead men. They were secretive even in the sprawled puppet-like helplessness of death; he could learn nothing. Except—hold, what was that owner's brand—

A double crescent.

The double crescent!

The knowledge shocked home like a spear-thrust, and Alfric sat silent for a long moment with the wind ruffling his

night-black hair. The double crescent—the sign of the Two Moons—that meant the slaves were Temple property. They'd been under orders of the priesthood of the Moons, which was the old Imperial faith and still the state religion of Valkarion.

But if the Temple sent out assassins—

ALFRIC'S EYES traveled up to Amaris, the farther moon, high in the darkening heavens. The nearer one, Danos, had not yet risen—out of the west, as was its strange wont—but its rocket-like speed would carry it up to and beyond the farther before dawn.

Aye—aye, now he remembered that tonight the moons would mate. On such nights the Temple no doubt had great ceremonies afoot; perhaps this matter of the assassination was involved in some religious proceeding.

Whispered legend and the moldering history books alike agreed that the turning points of the old Empire's fate had come on nights when the moons mated. No doubt that still held good for the withered remnant of territory which Valkarion still ruled.

The moons were not important in the religion of the Aslakan barbarians, whose chief gods were the wind and the stars and nameless powers of winter and death. But a tingle of fear ran along Alfric's spine at the thought of what might be abroad that night.

To Luigur with it! His lean face twisted in a snarl, and he snapped sword and javelin back in place and rode trotting on toward Valkarion. Come ambush or priesthood or the Moons themselves, he meant to sleep in the city tonight.

Behind him, the hovering falkh wheeled down toward the two still forms sprawled on the highway.

The sun slipped into the dead sea-bottom, and night came with a silent rush. Amaris rode high in a froth of stars, painting the hills with a dim eerie silver in which monstrous shadows lurked. The wind blew stronger, colder, with a faint smell of salt like the ghost of the long-dried ocean. Alfric wrapped his worn cloak tighter about him against its searching chill. Save for the vast echoing howl

of the wind, the hiss of sand and rustle of leaves, he was alone in the dark. He heard the creak and jingle of his harness, the rapid *clopclop* of the hengist's hoofs, against a background of hooting night.

The crumbling city walls loomed darkly before him, rearing enormously against the myriad brilliant, unwinking stars. He had half expected to find the gates closed, but instead a fire blazed in the tunnel which the gateway made through the walls. A dozen city guards stood about it.

They sprang to alertness as he rode up, a sudden wall of spears leaning forth in front of him. Behind that shining steel, the light picked out helmets and corselets and faces drawn tight with strain.

"Who goes?" called one. His voice shook a little.

"A stranger, but a friend," said Alfric in his north-accented Valkariona.

He rode into the circle of firelight and sat in a watchful quiet as their eyes raked him. Plainly he was an outland barbarian—taller by a head than most of the south-erners, his hard-thewed body clad in the plain leather and ring-mail of a northern warrior, his sword a double-edged claymore rather than the scimitar or shortsword of the south. His skin was a sun-burned leathery brown where theirs was tawny, his long slant eyes a brilliant green where theirs were dark, and there were jeweled rings in his pointed ears. He went cleanshaven in accordance with southern custom, but the high cheekbones, thin straight nose, and long jaw were not theirs.

"Who are you, stranger," demanded the guard captain, "and what is your errand?"

"I am Alfric, Beodan's son, of Aslak," he answered truthfully enough, "and am simply wandering about in search of employment. Perhaps Valkarion could use another sword-arm, or some merchant may want a good warrior to help guard his caravan, or—" he spread his calloused hands in a general gesture. No need to add that perhaps some highwayman was in town recruiting or some would-be rebel was in search of an experienced war-captain who would help for the loot. In his years of adventuring, Alfric had held most jobs, lawful or otherwise.



The guards seemed more taut and wary than the occasion warranted. Surely they had passed stranger and more dubious visitors than a single barbarian. Perhaps they wanted a bribe to let him by, or—

The captain nodded stiffly. "You may enter, since you are alone," he said; and then, with a friendliness not quite natural: "If you wish good cheap lodging, and a place where men come who might want to hire a fighter, try the Falkh and Firedrake. First turn to your right, three streets down, one to your left. Good luck, stranger."

Alfric scowled. For a moment he paused, tensing. There was something here—To Luigur with it. His nerves were still on edge from the fight. If something was supposed to happen, let it.

"Thanks," he said, and rode into the city.

IT WAS LIKE most of the old Imperial towns—somewhat larger and busier than the rest, no more. On either side of the broad paved street rose the ancient, columned facades of the Empire, proud building even now when their treasures were long gone and their corners worn smooth by the winds of millennia. There were lamps lighting the main ways, their yellow glow splashing on a milling throng of folk.

Most were native Valkarionas—merchants in their flowing cloaks and fur-trimmed silken robes, workers and artisans in tunics of blue or gray, peasants in clumsy homespun garments and fur caps, swaggering young soldiers in red tunics and polished metal, painted harlots, ragged beggars, near-naked slaves, the others of a city where life still pulsed strong though the days of glory were more thousands of years behind than it was pleasant to count. But there were strangers—robed traders from Tsungchi and Begh Sarrah riding their humped dromads, black-skinned men of Suda and Astrak, coppery feather-cloaked mercenaries from Tollaciuatl, fair-haired barbarians from Valmannstad and the Marskan hills—all the world seemed met at Valkarion, in a babble of tongues and a swirl of colors.

There were many of the tonsured priests of the Moons abroad, in long red and black robes with the double crescent hanging from a silver chain about the neck. After each shaven pate padded one or more of the yellow slaves, silent and watchful, hand on knife or blowgun. Alfric scowled, and decided he had best find lodging before venturing out into such company. A trading center like Valkarion necessarily tolerated all creeds—still, someone *had* tried to kill him—

He edged out of the throng and followed the captain's directions. They brought him into an unsavory part of town, where moldering blank-walled houses crowded a winding labyrinth of narrow, unlighted streets and stinking alleys. Men of dubious aspect moved furtively through the shadowy maze, or brawled drunkenly before the tawdry inns and bawdy houses. Strange place for a city guardsman to direct him to—

But no priests or soldiers were in sight, which was recommendation enough. Alfric rode on until he saw the sign of the Falkh and Firedrake creaking in the chill gusty wind above a gloomy doorway.

He dismounted and knocked, one hand on his dagger. The door groaned open a crack and a thin scar-faced man looked out, his own hand on a knife.

"I want lodging for myself and my henchman," said Alfric.

The landlord's hooded eyes slid up and down the barbarian's tall form. An in-drawn breath hissed through his lips. "Are you from the northlands?" he asked.

"Aye." Alfric flung open the door and stepped into the taproom.

It was dim and dirty and low-ceiled, a few smoky torches throwing a guttering light on the hard-faced men who sat at the tables drinking the sour yellow wine of the south. They were all armed, all wary—the place was plainly a hangout of thieves and murderers.

Alfric shrugged broad shoulders. He'd stayed in such places often enough. "How much do you want?" he asked.

"Ah—" The landlord licked his lips, nervously. "Two chrysteres for supper now and breakfast tomorrow, one soldar room and girl."

The rate was so low that Alfric's eyes narrowed and his ears cocked forward in an instinctive gesture of suspicion. These southerners all named several times the price they expected to get, but he had never haggled one down as far as this fellow's asking price.

"Done," he said at last. "But if the food is bad or the bed lousy or the woman diseased, I'll throw you in your own pot and cut my breakfast off your ribs."

"Twill not be needful, noble sir," whined the landlord. He waved a thin little slave boy over. "Take care of the gentleman's hengist."

**A**LFRIC SAT DOWN at a corner table and ate his meal alone. The food was greasy, but not bad. From the shadows he watched his fellow guests, sizing up their possibilities. That big spade-bearded fellow—he might be the head of a gang which would find an expert sword-slinger useful. And the little wizened man in the gray cloak might be a charlatan in need of a bodyguard—

He grew slowly aware of their own unease. There were too many sharp glances thrown in his own direction, entirely too many—too much whispering behind hands, too much furtive loosening of sheathed daggers. There was something infernally strange going on in Valkarion.

Alfric bristled like an angry jaccur, but throttled impatience and got up. Time enough to find all that out tomorrow—he was tired now from his long ride; he would sleep and then in the morning look the city over.

He mounted the stairs, conscious of the glances following him, and opened the door the boy showed to him. There he paused, and his hard jaw fell.

The room was just a room, small, lit by one stump of candle, no furniture save a bed. Its window looked out on an alley which was like a river of darkness.

It was the woman who held Alfric's eyes.

She was clad only in the usual gaudy silken shift, and she sat plucking thin chords from the usual one-stringed harp. Her rings and bracelets were ordinary cheap gewgaws, But she was no common

tavern bawd—not she!

Tall and lithe and tawny-skinned, she rose to face him. Her shining blue-black hair tumbled silkily to her slim waist, framing a face as finely and proudly chiseled as a piece of ancient sculpture—broad clear forehead, delicately arched nose, full mobile mouth, stubborn chin, long smooth throat running down toward her high firm breasts. Her eyes were wide-set, dark and starry brilliant as the desert nights; her lips were like red flame.

When she spoke, it was music purring under the wind that whimpered outside and rattled the window sash.

"Welcome, stranger."

Alfric gulped, licked his lips, and slowly recovered his voice: "Thank you, my lovely." He moved closer to her. "I had not—not thought to find one like you—here."

"But now that you have—" She came closer, and her smile blinded him—"now that you have, what will you do?"

"What do you think?" he laughed.

She bent over and blew out the candle.

## II

**A**LFRIC LOST DESIRE FOR sleep, the girl being as skilled in the arts of love as she was beautiful. But later they fell to talking.

A dim shaft of moonlight streamed through the window and etched her face against the dark, a faint mysterious rippling of light and shadow and loveliness. He drew her closer, kissed the smooth cheek, and murmured puzzledly: "Who are you? Why are you working in a place like this, when you could be the greatest courtesan in the world? Kings would be your slaves, and armies would go to battle with your name on their lips—if they only knew you."

She shrugged. "Fortune does strange things sometimes," she said. "I am Freha, and I am here because I must be." Her slim fingers ruffled his harsh black hair. "But tonight," she breathed, "I am glad of it, since you came. And who are you, stranger?"

"I am Alfric, called the Wanderer, son of Beodan the Bold, son of Asgar the Tall, from the hills and lakes of Aslak."

"And why did you leave your home, 'Alfric?"

"I was restless." For a bleak moment, he wondered why, indeed, he had ever longed to get away from the wind-whispering trees and the cool blue hills and the small, salty, sun-glinting lakes of home—from his father's great hall and farmstead, from the brawling lusty warriors who were his comrades, from the tall sweet girls and joys of the hunt and feast—Well, it was past now, many years past.

"You must have come far," said Freha.

"Far indeed. Over most of the world, I imagine." From Aslak, pasture lands of hengists, to the acrid red deserts of Begh Sarrah, the scrub forests of Astrak and Tollaciuatl, the towered cities of Tsungchi—along the great canals which the ancient Empire had built in its last days, still bringing a trickle of water from the polar snows to the starved southlands—through ruins, always ruins, the crumbling sand-filled bones of cities which had been like jewels a hundred thousand years ago and more—

Her cool hands passed over his face, pausing at the long dull-white scar which slashed across his forehead and left cheek. "You have fought," she said. "How you have fought!"

"Aye. All my life. That scar—? I got it at Altaris, when I led the Bonsonian spears at the storming of the gates. I have been war-captain, sitting beside kings, and I have been hunted outlaw with the garms baying at my heels. I have drunk the wine of war-lords and eaten the gruel of peasants and stalked my own game through the rime-white highlands of Larkin. I have pulled down cities, and been flung into the meanest jails. One king put a price on my head, another wanted me to take over his throne, and a third went down the streets before me, ringing a bell and crying that I was a god. But enough." Alfric stirred restlessly. Somehow, he felt again uneasy, as if—

Freha pulled his face to hers, and the kiss lasted a long time. Presently she murmured, "We have heard some rumors of great deeds and clashing swords, here in Valkarion. The story of the fall of Altaris is told in the marketplaces, and folk listen

till far into the night. But why did you not stay with your kings and war-lords and captured cities? You could have been a king yourself."

"I grew weary of it," he answered shortly.

"Weary—of kingly power?"

"Why not? Those courts are nothing—a barbarian ruling over one or two cities, and calling himself a king and trying drearily to hold a court worthy of the title. The same, always the same endless squabbling, carrion birds quarreling among the bones of the Empire. I went on the next war, or to see the next part of the world, and ere long I learned never to stay too long in one place lest the newness of it wear off."

"Valkarion is ever new, 'Alfric. A man could live his life here and never see all there was."

"Perhaps. So they told me. And it was, after all, the old seat of the Empire, and its shrunken remnant of territory is still greater than any other domain. So I came here to see for myself." Alfric grinned, a wolfish gleam of teeth in the night. "Also, I heard tales—restlessness, a struggle for power between Temple and Imperium, with the Emperor an old man and the last of his line, unable to get a child on his young queen Hildaborg. It seemed opportune."

"How so?" He thought she breathed faster, lying there beside him.

HE CHUCKLED, a harsh iron sound in his corded throat. "How should I know? Except that when such a hell's broth is bubbling, a fighting man can always scoop up loot or power or—at the very least—adventure. If nothing else, there might be the Empress. They say she's a half barbarian herself, a princess of Choredon, and a lusty wench giving hospitality to every visiting noble or knight." He felt Freha stiffen a little, and added: "But that doesn't interest me now, when I've found you. Freha, leave this place with me tomorrow and you'll wear the crown jewels of Valkarion."

"Or else see your head on a pike above the walls," she said.

Faintly through the window and the

whining night-wind, they heard the crash of a great gong.

"Dannos is rising," whispered Freha. "Tonight he mates with Mother Amaris. It is said that the Fates walk through the streets of Valkarion on such nights." She shivered. "Indeed they do on this eve."

"Perhaps," said Alfric, though the hackles rose on his neck. "But how do you know?"

"Have you not heard?" Her voice shuddered, seeming to blend with the moan of wind and steady, slow boom of gong. "Have you not heard? The Emperor Aureon is dying. He is not expected to last till dawn. The Thirty-ninth Dynasty dies with him, and—and there is no successor!"

The wind mumbled under the eaves, rattling the window frame and flowing darkly through the alley.

"Ha!" Alfric laughed harshly, exultantly. "A chance—by Ruho, what a chance!"

Of a sudden he stiffened, and the voice of danger was a great shout in his head. He sat up, cocking his ears, and heard the faint scratch and scrape—aye, under the window, coming close—

He slid from the covers and drew his sword where it lay on the floor. The boards felt cold under his bare feet, the night air fingered his skin with icy hands. "What is it?" whispered Freha. She sat up, the dark hair tumbling past her frightened face. "What is it, Alfric?"

He made no answer, but padded over to the window. Flattened against the wall, he stood waiting as a hand raised the sash from outside.

The pale cold light of Amaris fell on the hand that now gripped the sill. A body lifted itself, one-handed, the other clutching a knife. For an instant Alfric saw the flat hairless face in the moonlight, the double crescent brand livid against its horrible blankness. Then in one rippling motion the slave was inside the room.

Alfric thrust, slicing his heart. As the man fell, another swarmed up behind him. He and Alfric faced each other, tableau for one instant of rivering moonlight and whining wind and remotely beating gong. Then the barbarian's long arm shot out, yanked the slave in, and twisted him in an

unbreakable wrestler's grip.

"Talk!" he hissed into the ear of the writhing creature. "Talk, or I'll break you bone by bone. Why are you here?"

"He can't," said Freha. She came up to them, white in the moonlight, her long hair blowing loose about her shoulders. "The Temple breeds these slaves, raises them from birth to utter, fanatical obedience. And—see—" She pointed to the dead man gaping under the window.

Stooping over, Alfric saw that he had no tongue.

THE NORTHERNER shuddered. With a convulsive movement, he broke the neck of his prisoner and flung the body aside. "What do they want?" he panted. "Why are they after me?"

"There is a prophecy—but quick, there will be others. Out, down to the taproom—we must have protection—"

"The assassins would hardly be so stupid as to leave us a way out," grunted Alfric. "Any down there who might help us are probably dead or made prisoner now. No doubt these men have friends on guard, just outside the door—men who'll come in pretty soon when these don't come out—"

"Aye—that would be the way of the Temple—but where, then, where?"

Alfric flung on his kilt, dagger belt, and baldric. "Out the window!" He whipped the girl to him, held her supple body against his, kissed her hard and swift as the swoop of a hunting falkh. "Goodbye, Freha, you have been a wonderful companion. I'll see you again—if I live."

"But—you can't leave me!" she gasped. "The slaves will burst through—"

"Why should they harm you? They're after me."

"They will." He felt her shaking against him. "They will, that's their way—oh!"

The door shuddered as a heavy weight was flung against it. "That's they," snarled Alfric. "And the bolt won't hold very long. I'd like to stay and fight, but—Come!" He grabbed his cloak off the floor and buckled it across Freha's slim naked shoulders. "I'll go first—then you jump."

He balanced on the window-sill, then leaped. Even as he fell, he wondered at

the agility of the slaves who had crawled up the wall. It was of roughset stones, but even so—

He hit the muck and cobblestones of the alley with the silent poise of a jaccur, and turned up to the window. It was just above the pit-black shadows, a square of darkness in the moon-whitened wall. "Come!" he called softly.

Freha's body gleamed briefly in the moonlight as she sprang. He caught her in his arms, set her down, and drew his sword. "Let's go," he growled. Then suddenly: "But where? Will the city guards protect us?"

"Some might," she answered shakily, "but most are controlled by fear of the Temple's curse. Best we go toward the palace. The Emperor's Household troops are loyal to him and hate the priesthood which seeks to usurp his power."

"We can head that way," he nodded, "meanwhile looking for a place to hide." He took her hand and they trotted through the thick darkness toward the dim light marking the end of the alley.

Other feet padded in the gloom. Alfric snarled soundlessly and pulled himself and the girl against a wall. He was almost blind in the dark, but he strained his ears, pointing them this way and that in search of the enemy.

The others had also stopped moving. They would be waiting for him to stir, and their own motionlessness could surely outlast the girl's—anyway, the pursuit from the room would be after him in another moment, when the door gave way—

"Run!" he snapped.

**H**E FELT a dart blow by the spot where he had spoken, and lengthened his frantic stride. A form rose before him, vague in the night. He chopped down with his sword, and felt a grim joy at the ripping of flesh and sundering of bone.

Now—out of the alley, into a street not much wider or lighter, and down its shadowy length. The slaves would be behind, but—

There was a one-story house ahead, of the usual flat-roofed construction. "Up!" gasped Alfric, and made a stirrup of his hands. He fairly flung the girl onto the

roof. She gave him a hand up, bracing her feet against the parapet, and they fell down together behind it.

Alfric heard the slaves' bare feet trotting below him, but dared not risk a glance. Snakelike, he and Freha slithered across the housetop. Only a narrow space separated them from the next; they jumped that and crossed over to another and higher roof. From this, Alfric peered into the street beyond.

A couple of city guards were walking down it, spears at the ready. Alfric wondered whether he should join them—no, they would be no shield against a blow-gun dart sent from an alley—anyway, they might be priest-loyal.

He put his mouth to Freha's ear, even then aware of the dark silky hair tickling his lips, and whispered: "What next?"

"I don't know." She looked ahead over the nighted roofs to the great central forum, still ruddy-bright with torches. Beyond it, the city climbed toward a double hill, on either crest of which was a building. One must be the palace, thought Alfric—it was in the graceful colonnaded style of the later Empire, white marble under Amaris. Nearly all its windows were dark; but he thought, puzzledly, that it was surrounded by a ring of fires.

The other building was a great gray pile, sprawling its grim massiveness in a red blaze of light. From it came the steady gong-beat and a rising chant—the Temple of the Two Moons, holding vigil at their wedding.

The night was huge above them, a vault of infinite crystal black in which the stars glittered in their frosty myriads and the Milky Way tumbled its bright mysterious cataract between the constellations. The pale disc of Amaris rode high, painting the city and the hills and the dead sea-floor with its cold ghostly light. And now Dannos was swinging rapidly out of the west, brightening the dark and casting weird double shadows that slowly writhed with its changing position.

It was bitter chill. The wind blew and blew, hooting down the streets, banging signs and driving dead leaves and sand and bits of parchment before it. Alfric shivered, wishing for the rest of his clothes

In the waxing moonlight, he could see sand-devils whirling on the sea-bottom, a witches' dance—and on such a night, trolls and ghosts and the Fates themselves might well be abroad.

He set his teeth against chattering and tried to fix his mind on real and desperately urgent problems. "The priests seemed able to trace us," he said. "At least, they knew where I went for lodging. Best we work toward the palace as you say, but look for a ruined house or some such place to hide in till morning."

## III

THE STREET BELOW WAS DESERTED now. They jumped down to it and darted into the shadows on the other side. Slipping along the walls of buildings they followed its twisting length for some time. An occasional cloaked form passed silently by; otherwise there was only the bitter wind echoing hollowly along the tunnel-like streets.

Of a sudden Alfric stiffened. He heard the measured tramp of feet—a city patrol approaching, just around the next corner. Whirling, he led the way into an alley black as a cave mouth. It was blind, but there was a door at the end, from behind which came the twanging of harps and the thin evil whine of desert flutes. A tavern—shelter, of a sort—

Moonlight glistened on steel as the half-dozen guardsmen passed the alley—passed, stopped, and turned back. "They may be here," Alfric heard a voice.

Cursing under his breath, the northerner opened the door and stepped through, into a room barely lit by a few tapers, thick with smoke and the smell of unwashed bodies. Alfric's nostrils quivered at the heavy sweet odor of shivash, and he noticed the floor covered with stupefied smokers. A little yellow man scurried back and forth, filling the pipes. At the farther end, with music and girls, were wine-drinkers, ragged men of ill aspect who looked up with hands on knives.

Freha slammed the bolt down behind them, and Alfric brandished his great sword and said to them all: "Show us a way out."

A fist beat on the door, a voice shouted: "Open, in the name of the Holy Temple!" "No way out," gasped the landlord.

"There is always an exit to these dens," snapped Freha. "Show us, or we split your skull."

A man's knife-hand moved with blurring speed. Alfric stopped the thrown dagger with his sword-blade in a clang of steel, caught it in midair, and hurled it back. The man screamed as it thunked into his belly.

"Out!" snarled the barbarian, and his glaive sang about the landlord's ears.

"Here," cried the little man, running toward the end of the room.

The door groaned as the guardsmen hurled themselves against it.

The landlord opened a concealed trapdoor. Only darkness was visible below. Alfric snatched a torch from the wall and saw a tunnel of dark stone. "Down!" he rapped, and Freha jumped. He followed, bolting the trap behind him. It was of heavy iron—the soldiers would have to work to break through it.

The tunnel stretched hollowly away on either side. Freha broke into a run and Alfric loped beside her, the torch streaming in one hand and the sword agleam in the other. Their footfalls echoed through the cold moist dark.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Old sewers—not used now when water is scarce—a warren under the city—" gasped Freha.

"We can hide here, then," he panted.

"No—only the Temple knows all the passages—they'll have slaves guarding every exit—we'll be trapped unless we get out soon—"

Dim sky showed ahead, a hole with a rusted iron ladder leading up into it. Alfric doused his torch and swung noiselessly up the rungs to peer out.

The manhole opened into one of the ruinous abandoned districts, crumbling structures and shards of stone half buried by the drifting sand. Three guardsmen stood watching, spears at the ready. Otherwise there were only the moons and the wind and the silently watching stars.

Alfric's lip twisted in a snarl. So—the holes were already plugged! But—

wait, all egresses could not be guarded yet; best to go on in search of another—no, by the time the fugitives got there it might be watched too. Here there was at least an absence of people to interfere.

HE SPRANG OUT and rushed at the three, so swiftly that they were hardly aware of him before his blade was shrieking about them. One man tumbled with his head nearly sheared off. Another yelled, leaping back to thrust with his spear. Alfric dodged the jab, grabbed the shaft in one hand and pulled. The guardsman stumbled forward and Alfric's sword rang on his helmet. He dropped, stunned by the fury of the blow.

The third was on Alfric like an angry jaccur. His spear-thrust furrowed along the barbarian's ribs. Alfric closed in, grinning savagely in the cold white moonlight, and thrust with his sword. The guard parried the blow with his small buckler, dropped his spear, and drew his shortsword. Bending low, he rushed in, probing for Alfric's guts, and the northerner skipped aside barely in time. The broadsword chopped down, through the guard's left leg. Blood spurted, the man crashed to earth, and Alfric stabbed him through the face before he could scream.

The second was climbing dizzily to his feet. Alfric knocked the sword from a nerveless hand and brought his own blade against the guardsman's throat. "Hold," he said. "One word, one movement, and you'll roll in the gutter with your comrades."

Freha came up, the cloak blowing about her wonderful naked body in the wild wind. She was a fay sight under the moons, and the prisoner groaned as he saw her. "Lady—lady, forgive—"

"Forgive a traitor?" she asked, wrath sparking in her voice.

"Why are the priests after me?" rapped Alfric.

The guard stared. "Surely—surely you know—"

"I know nothing. Speak, if you want to remain a man."

"The prophecy—the priests warned us about you, that you were the heathen conqueror of the prophecy . . . Later they

said that—" the guard's desperate eyes turned to Freha. "They said *you*, your majesty—" His voice trailed off.

"Say on," she snapped. "Give me the priests' own words. By Dannos, they'll all swing for this! I am still Empress of Valkarion!"

Alfric looked at her in sudden shock, as if he had been clubbed. Empress—the Empress of Valkarion—

"But—they said you were not, your majesty . . . the Emperor is dead, he died soon after sundown—"

"As soon as I was gone, eh? A priest's work, I am thinking. Someone will answer for that. Go on!"

"The High Priest sent word over the city. He told of the prophecy—we all knew of that, but he told it anew. But he said the heathen king could still be slain, and offered a thousand gildars to the man who did it." The guard gulped. "Then he said you—forgive me, lady, you asked for his words—he said since the Dynasty was now dead, the Temple would rule till further arrangements could be made. But the Empress Hildaborg, half barbarian, idolatrous witch—those were his words, your majesty—she lay under the Temple's ban. He said she was to be killed, or better captured, with the heathen stranger, with whom she would probably join forces. He put the most solemn curse of the Two Moons on anyone who should aid you and the man, or even fail to help hunt for you—" The guardsman sank to his knees, shaking. "Lady, forgive me! I have a family, I was afraid to refuse—"

"What of my Household troops?" she snapped.

"The priests sent a detachment of the city guards against them—a dreadful battle. The Household repelled the attack, but now they are besieged in the palace—"

"Little help there, then." Hildaborg laughed mirthlessly. "All the city against us, and our only friends bottled in a ring of spears. You chose an unlucky time to enter Valkarion, Alfric."

The barbarian's head was spinning. "You are—the Empress," he gasped, "and there's some nonsense about me . . . What is this prophecy? Why did you—" his voice, helpless with bewilderment, faded

off into the moaning wind.

"No time now, someone may be along any moment . . . Where to hide, where to hide?"

**A**LFRIC'S EYES traveled down to the two bodies sprawled on the street. Suddenly he laughed, a harsh metallic bark. "Why, in the very lair of the foe!" he said. "As good citizens, it behooves us to join the hunt for the outlaws. Here is suitable clothing for us."

She nodded, and fell at once to stripping the corpses. Alfric looked arrowy at the prisoner. "If you betray us—" he murmured.

"I won't—by the Moons, I swear I won't—"

"Indeed you won't," said Alfric, and lifted sword to cut him down.

Hildaborg sprang up and grabbed his arm. "That's a barbarous trick," she exclaimed angrily. "You need only bind and gag him, and hide him in one of these ruins."

"Why worry about the life of a guardsman?" he asked contemptuously.

Her dark head lifted in pride. "I am Empress of the guardsmen too," she said.

"As you like," shrugged Alfric.

The captive turned a face of utter worship to the woman. "You must secure me," he said, his voice shaking. "But when I am released, my body and soul are yours forever, my lady."

Hildaborg smiled, and proceeded to cut strips of cloth and dispose of the guard as she had said. Then she turned to Alfric. "You are hard of heart," she murmured, "but perhaps Valkarion needs one like you, strong and ruthless." Her deep eyes glowed. "How you fought, Alfric! How you fought!"

The barbarian squatted down and began wiping blood off the looted armor. "I've had enough," he growled. "I've been hoodwinked and hounded over the whole damned city, I've been thrown into a broil I never heard of, and now I want some truth. What is this prophecy? Why are you here? What does everyone want—" he laughed humorlessly—"besides our heads?"

"The prophecy—it is in the Book of the

Sibyl, Alfric. It was made I know not how many thousands or tens of thousands of years ago, at the time of the Empire's greatest glory. There was a half-mad priestess who chanted songs of ruin and desolation, which few believed—what could harm the Empire? But the songs were handed down through many generations by a few who had some faith, and slowly it was seen that the songs spoke truth. One thing came to pass after another, just as it was foretold. Then the songs were collected by the priesthood, who use the book to guide their policies."

"Hm— I wonder. I've no great faith in *spædom* myself."

"These prophecies are true, Alfric! Now and again they have erred, but I think that is simply because the songs had become garbled in the long time they were handed down without much belief. All too often, the future history in the Book has been written anew by time's own pen." Hildaborg slipped a guardsman's tunic over her slim form. Her eyes were half-shut, dreaming. "They say the Sibyl was loved by Dannos, who gave her the gift of prophecy, and that Amaris jealously decreed she should foretell evil oftener than good. But a wise man at court, who had read much of the almost forgotten science of the ancients, told me he thought the prophecies could be explained rationally. He said sometimes the mind can slip forward along the—the world line, he called it, the body's path through a space and time that are one space-time. Sometimes, he said, one can 'remember' the future. He said the Sibyl's mind could have followed the world lines of her descendants too, thus traveling many ages ahead . . . but be that as it may, she *spæd* truly, and her prophecy of tonight is of—you!"

The warrior shook his dark head, feeling a sudden eerie weight of destiny. "What was the tale?" he whispered. The wind whipped the words from his mouth and whirled them down the empty street.

**H**ILDABORG STOOD while he buckled the corselet on her, and her voice rose in a weird chant that sang raggedly across the ruined buildings, under the stars and the two flying moons. Even



Alfric's hardy soul was shaken by the ominous words, his hands trembling ever so faintly as he worked.

*"Woe, woe to Dannos and to Amaris and to those who serve them, cry woe on Valkarion and the world! The Thirty-ninth Dynasty shall end on the night when Dannos weds again with Amaris; winds shall howl in the streets and bear away his soul. Childless shall the Emperor die, the Imperial line shall die with him, and a stranger shall sit in the high throne of Valkarion."*

*"He shall come riding alone and friendless, riding a gray hengist into Valkarion on the evening of that night. A heathen from the north is he, a worshipper of the wind and the stars, a storm which shall blow out the last guttering candles of the Empire. From the boundless wastes of the desert shall he ride, ruin and darkness in his train, and the last long night of the Empire will fall when he comes."*

*"Woe, Dannos, your temple will stand in flames when the heathen king is come! Woe, Mother Amaris, he will defile your holy altars and break them down! Gods themselves must die, their dust will whirl on the breath of his wind-god, the last blood of the Empire will be swallowed by the thirsty desert."*

*"Woe, for the heathen night which falls! Woe, for the bitter gray dawn which follows! The Moons of the Empire have set, and an alien sun rides baleful over Valkarion."*

There was silence after that, save for the hooting of wind and the thin dry whisper of blowing sand. Dannos swung higher, a pale cold eye in the frosty heavens. Alfric clamped his teeth together and finished the disguise.

The armor and clothing were strained on his tall form, ill-fitting, but with the cloak draped over, and the helmet shadowing his face, he should pass muster. Under the cloak, across his back, he had his broadsword—these short southern stabbers were no good.

Hildaborg was better fitted. Slim and boyish in the shining steel, her long hair tucked under the crested helm, spear carried proudly erect, she seemed a young goodness of war. Alfric thought dizzily

that no such woman had ever crossed even his dreams.

He hid the corpses in the ruins and they started down the street together. "We'll try to work through the line of siege, into the palace," he said. "Once we're with your troops, something may still be done."

"I doubt it. They are brave men, but few—few." Her voice was bitter.

"If we can—" Alfric sank into thought for a while. Then suddenly he said: "Now I know why the priests are after me. But what of you? Where do you come into this picture?"

"I knew about the prophecy," she replied. "Also, I knew what my fate was likely to be when Aureon died. The Temple and the Imperium, ostensibly the two pillars of the Empire, have long been struggling for power. Each side has its warriors and spies, its adherents among the nobles and commons—oh, the last several generations have been a weary tale of intrigue, murder, corruption, with first one side and now another on top. The Temple wants a figurehead Emperor, the Imperium wants a subservient priesthood—well, you know the story."

"Aye. A sorry one. It should be ended with the sword. Wipe both miserable factions out and start anew."

SHE LOOKED curiously at him. "So the Sibyl was not wrong," she murmured. "The heathen come out of the north with destruction alike for the Empire and the gods."

"Luigur take it, I don't care about Valkarion! Not even enough to destroy it. I only want to save my own neck." His hand stroked her arm, softly. "And yours. But go on."

"The Thirty-ninth Dynasty was the last family with any pretensions to even a trace of the legendary Imperial blood, the line of Dannos himself. And Aureon was the last of them—his sons slain in war, himself an old man without relatives. The Imperial line had been weakening and dying for generations—inbred, enfeebled, degenerate, the blood of Dannos running thinner in each new birth. Aureon had sense enough to take a second wife of different stock—myself, princess of Choredon.

Thereby he gained a valuable ally for Valkarion—but no children, and now he is dead." Hildaborg sighed. "So the Imperium is gone, the Temple is the sole power, and a strong and unscrupling High Priest rules Valkarion. I think the Priest, Therokos, intends to proclaim Valkarion a theocracy with himself as the head. But first, for reasons of politics and personal hatred, he must get rid of me."

"Why should he hate you?"

Hildaborg smiled twistedly. "He disapproves of barbarians, and my mother was from Valmannstad. He disapproves of my laxness in religious matters. He knows I stand between him and absolute power. I gave Aureon strength to oppose him and thwarted many of his measures. The commons think well of me, I have done what I could to improve their lot, and he hates any hold on Valkarion's soul other than his own.

"I knew that with Aureon dead and no heir of the blood, Therokos would feel free to strike. I could not hope to match him for long, especially since the law is that no woman may rule in Valkarion. My one chance seemed to lie in the new conqueror who was to come. Yet I could not approach him openly—the Temple spies were everywhere, and anyway the prophecy was that he would be a destroying fury, worse perhaps than the priests. I had to sound him out first, and secretly.

"So I put a trustworthy guards-captain in charge of the gate today, with instructions to direct the stranger to the Falkh and Firedrake. The landlord there was paid to make sure you would stay, and would take the room where I was in my guise of tavern girl.

"So you came. But now it seems the priests were ware to my plan. They have acted swifter than I thought, striking instantly at my men—I expected at least a few days of truce. And I played into their hands by thus cutting myself off from all help. Now they need only hunt us down and kill us."

"'Twill take some doing," growled Alfric. "Ha, we may yet pull their cursed temple down about their shaven skulls!"

"And so the prophecy would be fulfilled

—you would blow out the last dim flicker of light—" She stopped, staring at him, and her voice came slowly: "Valkarion, the last citadel of civilization, the last hope of the dying world, to be wasted by a heathen bandit—perhaps the priests are right, Alfric of Aslak. Perhaps you should die."

"Luigur take your damned prophecy!" he snarled.

THEY STOOD tautly facing each other in the thin chill moonlight. The wind blew and blew, whining between the empty ruins of houses, blowing the dust of their erosion along the empty street.

"I know your old Imperial towns," said Alfric savagely. "I've seen them, moldering shells, half the place deserted because the population has shrunk so far—wearily dreaming of a dead past, grubbing up the old works and sitting with noses buried in the old books, while robbers howl in the deserts and thieving politicians loot the treasury. Year by year, the towns crumble, bridges fall, canals dry up, people grow fewer—and nobody cares. A world is blowing away in red dust, and nobody stirs to help. By the winds of Ruho, it's about time someone pulled down that tottering wreck you call Imperial civilization! It's about time we forgot the past and started thinking—and doing—something about the present. The man who burns Valkarion will be doing the world a service!"

Silence, under the wind and the stars and the two moons marching toward their union. Hildaborg hefted her spear until the point gleamed near Alfric's throat.

He sneered, out of bitterness and despair and a sudden longing for her lips. "Don't try to stick me with that toy. You saw what happened to the guards."

"And you would kill me?" Her voice was all at once desolate; she dropped the spearhead to the ground.

"No. But I would leave you—no, by the Holy Well, I wouldn't. But I'd leave the damned city." He stepped forward, laying his hands on her mailed shoulders, and his voice rang with sudden earnestness. "Hildaborg, that is your answer. No need to stay in this place of death. We can steal hengists and bluff our way past the

gates and be in the hills ere dawn. If you fear for Valkarion at my hands, leave it—leave it to rot and come with me.”

“Come—where?”

“Home, back to Aslak. Back to the blue hills and the windy trees and the little lakes dancing in the sun—to an open heaven and a wide land and free folk who look you honestly in the eye. Luigur take the Empire, as he will whatever we do.” He laughed, a joyous sound echoing in the night. “We’ll build our own stead and live as freefolk and raise a dozen tall sons. Hildaborg, let’s go!”

For a moment, she stood silent. When she spoke, her voice trembled a little, and the moonlight glinted off tears in her eyes.

“I love you for it, Alfric, and gladly would go. But Therokos is besieging the palace—he is gathering in all who ever spoke well of me . . . shall my friends be hanged and burned and hacked to bits, and I safe in Aslak?”

“You’re a fool. What could you do for them?”

“Die. But this is no quarrel of yours, Alfric. If you wish, go, and I shall not think of the less of you. Go—my dearest—”

He laughed again, and kissed her for a very long moment. “You are a fool and a madwoman, and I love you for that,” he said. “Come—we can still show these priests the color of steel!”

#### IV

**THEY TROTTED RAPIDLY** along the ways, their mail clanking. Erelong they were out of the deserted district and approaching the central forum.

It seethed with people. All Valkarion seemed to be out tonight, moving slowly, aimlessly, under the compulsion of a nameless fear. The town buzzed with voices, low, secretive, and the shuffle of thousands of feet under the lamps and the bobbing torches. High over the muted tumult, blown on the harrying wind, chant and gong-beat came from the Temple.

Alfric and Hildaborg pushed their way through the milling, murmuring tide. The unease, the rising wave of fear, was like a tangible force; the northerner’s skin

prickled with it. Eyes, thousands of eyes, shifting and staring out of pale faces—the city was full of eyes.

He heard a voice as he came to the edge of the great plaza. Thrusting forward, the tall barbarian looked over the heads of the crowd. There was a rostrum, surrounded by a tight ring of Temple guards, and from atop it a robed priest was haranguing the throng.

“—the Dynasty is dead, and the wrath of the Moons lies heavy over Valkarion. Woe to the world, for the heathen fiend, the scourge of Dannos, is loose!

“Yet I bring hope—aye, from all-merciful Mother Amaris I bring cheer in this darkest hour. There is time, still time to seize the barbarian ere his power grows. There is still time, too, to seize and disown the half-caste witch Hildaborg. There is time to submit to the wise rule of the Temple, that the High Priest may intercede with All-father Dannos. Repent and be forgiven—destroy the evilworkers who brought this trouble on you, and the Matting of the Moons will yet bring forth a new birth of hope!”

Alfric grew aware of the muttering about him—the commons of Valkarion, laborer, artisan, merchant, peasant, turning thought over and growling it to his neighbor.

“—an ill choice, to see the city ruined or bow to the shavepates.”

“I am afraid. The Moons are high and bitter bright now, they are looking down on us. I am afraid.”

“’Twas Hildaborg who lowered the taxes. ’Twas Hildaborg, and not dotard Aureon or thieving Therokos, who whipped the army into shape and beat off the Savonnian invaders. What has the Temple ever done for us, save milk us for our tithes and frighten our babes with stories of godly wrath?”

“Hush! The Moons are watching!”

“Hildaborg is beautiful, she is like a goddess as she rides through the streets and smiles on us. Amaris herself is not more beautiful.”

“The Temple is holy.”

“The priests burned my Brother for sorcery. He had one of the old books, that is all; he tried to build the machine it

told of—and they burned him.”

“They have enough old books themselves. They sit on all the wisdom of the ancients, and none of us can so much as read.”

“The Fates are abroad tonight. I am afraid.”

“My son is in the Household. They’re after his skin—he’ll hang if he isn’t dead already—unless—”

“Aye, my son is in the city guards. They told him to go hunt down the stranger and the Empress—the *Empress!*—and off he went.” A grim chuckle. “But I think he is sitting quietly in some corner, waiting.”

“There is an old battle ax at home. My grandfather bore it in the Rurian war. I think I could still swing it if need be.”

“I am afraid—”

**A**LFRIC SMILED, a steely grimace in the shadow of his visor, and led the way onward.

But he was not to pass easily. He thrust aside a burly peasant, who turned on him with a snarl. “Mind your manners, guardsman! Is’t not enough you should be traitor to the Empress?”

“Aye, the city guards have sat about drinking and gaming and making the streets unsafe for our daughters,” said another man harshly. “They didn’t get off their fat butts till this chance came to go yapping after Hildaborg.”

Alfric tried to shoulder past the ring of angry folk who gathered. “Aside!” he called. “Aside, or I use my spear!”

“Mind your manners, guardsman,” grinned the peasant. He came closer, and Alfric smelled the wine on his breath. “What say we have a little fun with these priest-lovers, comrades? Will they squeal when we pummel ’em?”

Alfric’s fist shot out like a ball of iron. There was a dull smack, and the pleasant flew back against the man behind. The barbarian flailed out with his spear butt, and the crowd gave way.

“Through!” he muttered to Hildaborg. “Quick, we have to get away.”

“They’re our friends,” she whispered frantically. “Can’t we reveal—”

“And bring the guard down on this

unarmed mob? We wouldn’t last a moment. Come!”

A stone clanged against the girl’s helmet. She staggered, half collapsing into Alfric’s arms. The crowd growled, beast-like, and shoved in closer.

“Aside!” shouted Alfric. “Make way, or the curse of the Moons is on you!”

“You talk like a priest,” said a laborer thickly. He lifted a heavy billet of wood. “On them, boys! Kill them!”

Alfric laid the half-stunned girl on the ground, stood over her, and drew his broadsword. “An outlander!” shouted someone, back in the sea of shadowy, torch-lit, hating faces. “A mercenary, hunting our empress!”

The mob surged against him. He thrust around with the sword, striking to disable but not to kill—though he’d slay if he had to, he thought desperately.

Stones were flying. One hit him on the cheek. Pain knifed through his head. “Hai, Ruho!” he roared, and banged a skull. The mob edged away a little. Eyes and teeth gleamed white in the bloody torchlight.

A trumpet-blast sounded, harsh and arrogant over the rising voices. Someone screamed. Alfric saw spears aloft, steel gleaming red—a squad of guardsmen to the rescue.

The rescue! He groaned, lifted Hildaborg, and sought to retreat through the crowd.

Too late. The guards were hacking a bloody way through the mob; it scattered in panic and the squad was there.

“Just in time,” panted its chief. “The folk are ugly. They’ve killed a dozen guardsmen already, to my knowledge, a couple of priests, I don’t know how many Temple slaves—Dannos smite the blasphemers!”

“Thanks.” Alfric set the reviving girl on her feet. “Now I have to go—special mission, urgent—”

The chief looked sharply at him. “You have a barbarous accent,” he said slowly, “and you’re no Valkariona. Who—”

Hildaborg groaned, stirring back to consciousness. “Alfric—”

“A boy—no—” The officer stepped forth. Hildaborg’s lovely face turned toward the light, and he gasped. “She—”

ALFRIC PICKED UP his spear and hurled it through the chief's throat. Then he lifted his dripping sword and stood by Hildaborg, waiting for the end. "The Empress—the Empress, and the heathen—*We've found them!*"

The crowd had withdrawn, milling around the edges of the forum, too frightened and confused to help. The priest and his guards were coming on the double, *yelling for help*. Other armed men seemed to be springing from the ground.

"Alive!" shrilled the priest. "Take them alive if you can! A thousand gildars!"

The guards were well disciplined. They locked shields in a ring about Alfric and closed in. Man for man, he could have laughed at them—but this way—

Hildaborg swayed on her feet beside him. "So this is the end?" she whispered. "I love you, Alfric—"

He howled his rage, and sprang forward. The sword blurred in his hands, ringing on shields and helmets. A guard fell, shrieking, his right arm sheared off. Alfric stabbed another in the neck, kicked a third in the groin, and roared.

They surged around him, hemming him in with their shields. Clubbed spears thudded against his helmet, and it rang like a brazen gong. He staggered, shouted, struck out again—the sword fell from his hands—he toppled into a clamoring darkness—

Dimly, he was aware of being stripped of armor, chained hand and foot, hauled roughly to his feet. He lurched mechanically along, and slowly his head cleared. Through a mist of throbbing pain, he saw that Hildaborg walked beside him. Spears pricked their backs, the chains rattled on ankles and wrists. They were in the middle of a tight triple ring of guards, marching up the hill toward the Temple.

The villas of the mighty lay around them, white in the moonlight, fragrant with gardens. Alfric saw fountains splashing, and even then thought of the parched land beyond the walls, land that might flower again if it had that water.

But that would never be. He would swing high above the city, the falkhs would pick out his eyes—Hildaborg would die, and

the grip of the Temple would be locked on Valkarion till its last stones were dust on the wind.

Strength came back, a bleak resolve not to go down without one more fight. His brain began whirring, the old cold craftiness of his turbulent lifetime surged forward . . . hopeless! They were caught, they were done; all his struggles were the vain writhings of a beast in a cage.

"So this ends it." Hildaborg's voice was weary. Then she smiled a little. "But we made a good try, Alfric." And warmly: "And we have loved each other. That is enough."

"It is not," he answered. "But it is something."

"Silence!" commanded the priest.

Now they were on the hillcrest, the mighty walls of the Temple looming before them. Alfric saw it aswarm with slaves and guards and priests of all degrees. The gong-beat was a steady, tremendous crashing—it seemed to fill the world with its brazen clamor. High rose the chant of the Moon Wedding.

The warrior glanced aside, over to the palace. There was a bridge spanning the gully between the two hillcrests, and guards were on it. Other guards, city and Temple, were besieging the palace; he saw their fires in a ring about it. They were setting up a great ballista whose stones, he knew, would bring the walls down in ruin.

From the hilltop he could see over the moon-whitened desert and the vast reach of the old sea-bottom. Once it had been blue and alive, glittering with sunlight, the long waves rolling in to crash in foam and thunder on a dazzling beach. The harbor of Valkarion had been crowded with ships from all the world, a forest of tall masts, a wild perfumery of salt and tar and the spices of the south. And beyond, the land had been green, and white clouds had sailed through a soft blue summer sky.

WELL, IT WAS GONE—the world was dried into desert and scrubby forest and harsh meadowland, sand blew in the ancient beds of rivers and seas, the air was thin and chill and held a bitter tang of rust. The cities were in ruins, the

Empire was a shadow, and man was gone back to a few wretched remnants, sinking into barbarism and death.

Alfric looked up to the cold, splendid night sky. There was a tradition from the wise ancients, he had once been told, that those swarming bright star-hosts were other worlds and suns, happier, maybe, than this. It was some consolation.

The Moons were near their mating now. Bright Dannos was sweeping triumphantly down on pale Mother Amaris; he would cover her and then pass on, and out of that wedding would come the fate of the world. Cold fate, dark destiny—night and famine and death, the moons hurtling over a world sunk into final oblivion.

Well, men died, sometime or other, and all they could do about it was to meet the end bravely. Alfric squared his shoulders and marched into the Temple.

There was a long corridor, at the end of which he saw a vast room flashing in gold and silver and fiery jewels, draped with the costliest ancient tapestries. Even then, Alfric's eyes gleamed greenly. To loot that room!

They turned off along another hall, and then down a stone-cut flight of steps into the Temple dungeons. Alfric had been in enough jails before not to find the damp, rough-hewn rock tunnels strange, but Hildaborg shuddered and pressed closer to him.

A scream echoed down the corridor, rose and fell and died raggedly into the echoes. The priest smirked. "A heretic is being shown the error of his ways," he said unctuously. "He blasphemed against the Moons and swore he would abide by the Empress."

"Then the gods abide by him," said Hildaborg defiantly.

The guards thrust them into a cell, little more than a cave chipped out of the hill's heart, and locked their chains to staples in the walls. They were held barely able to move, facing each other with a few scant inches between—miles between, a world between, thought Alfric wearily—he would never kiss her again—

The guards clanged the door shut and left them in utter darkness. Hildaborg's voice trembled, but she spoke bravely:

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"What can we do?"

"Nothing, now." The barbarian strained against his chains, felt their solidity, and relaxed. "Wait for a chance, maybe. Otherwise—die."

"I don't want to die, Alfrie. I want to live, I want to see the sky and feel the wind and bear your sons."

"I don't enjoy the thought of death either, dearest. If we had fled to Aslak—"

"But we didn't, and for myself I am still glad. Though that you should die too—" Her voice broke, and he heard her quiet sobbing in the dark.

He tried to find words, but they were awkward. So he fell into silence.

Presently the door opened again. A man came in with only two torch-bearing Temple slaves accompanying. Alfrie looked at his magnificent robes and knew him for Therokos the High Priest.

HE WAS TALL, stoop-shouldered, a little on the fat side but well muscled underneath. His face was wide and heavy, sallow under the high shaven forehead, the mouth hard and thin, the eyes small and black and glittering-cold. When he spoke, his voice was wondrous, a deep organ which he played like a master musician.

"So we meet again, your majesty," he said, and bowed. There was little mockery in his tones; he seemed straightforward and businesslike.

Hildaborg did not answer. She stood with her beauteous form in its ragged soldier's tunic pressed against the wall. Her sweat-dampened black hair clung to her forehead, fell down her shoulders in a shining wave. In the restless torchlight, her face was white and drawn, streaked with blood and dirt and the tracks of tears, but she gave the High Priest glance for glance and her lips were steady.

Therokos looked Alfrie's tall form up and down. "And so you are the conqueror of the prophecy," he murmured. "A mighty man—but just how did you think you could do it? Who are your allies in the city? What was your plan?"

"I am Alfrie of Aslak, and I came here without friends or plan, knowing nothing of any prophecy," answered the barbarian

coldly. "And you are a misbegotten son of a she-garm, with whose head I will yet play football."

"Come now," said Therokos softly, surely you do not expect me to believe you are here by mere chance? Your cause is lost, you are doomed, but you can save yourself the inquisition and die easily if you will tell us what you know."

"I know nothing, you jerrad!"

"You may know more after the inquisitioners have worked on you awhile," said Therokos coldly. Then turning to Hildaborg, his voice suddenly rich and warm, throbbing with love and pity: "My lady, my lady, you do not know how I regret this. That the Empress of Valkarion should, even for dire necessity, be thus humiliated in the greatest sorrow of my life."

Hildaborg's lip curled. "I see you weeping," she said coldly.

"But I do, my lady—my heart is ashes within me. Only need drove me to this—and it is not yet too late to repent, your majesty. What the Moons have taken, the Moons can restore."

"Surely, my lady," said Therokos reasonably, "you can see the absolute necessity of my actions. Under the law, you could not rule, and there was no Imperial heir. Without a strong hand, leaderless Valkarion would have split under the quarreling of the nobles and the lawlessness of the commons, easy prey for barbarian enemies such as this man—and the Sibyl's warning would have come true. With the Imperium gone, the Temple, sole remaining pillar of Valkarion, *must* bear the burden of state."

"In other words," said Hildaborg coldly, "you will have yourself anointed Theocrat."

"The Moons have seen fit thus to honor my unworthiness," said Therokos. "But it would still be well if we should unite our forces. You have many loyal friends, my lady, myself not the least of them. If you will but wed me, we can together unite the factions in the city and build the Empire anew."

She smiled, almost a sneer. "Yours was a strange courtship."

"I have told you how the necessity

grieved me," said the priest. Suddenly his voice came hard as steel, cold as winter and death: "It is now my duty to offer you a choice. Call on your troops to surrender, your followers in the city to desist from their treasonous activities, and wed me this night, or—" he paused—"burn at the stake for blasphemy and witchcraft. But first you will be tied down and every slave in the Temple have his way with you."

"That might not be worse than leading my men into your hands," she flared. But her face was suddenly bloodless.

"You will be surprised how much worse it will be—especially since your men will die anyway. But I will offer you this, too: if you call on them to surrender, those who do may go into exile."

She stood a moment in silence, and Alfric knew what a horror must be clawing her heart. Then she nodded toward him: "What of my protector here?"

"The heathen bandit must die in any case, that the city may know itself safe from him and the prophecy," said Thero-kos. "He still has his choice of easy hanging or slow torture. But if you refuse me, Hildaborg, he will no longer have the choice; he will go to hell by inches, cursing you for it."

The lovely dark head bowed. It was as if a flame had gone out. Alfric felt ill at seeing her thus broken, given over to a lifetime's prisoning—golden chains they would be, but no less heavy and galling. "Goodbye, my dear," he whispered. "Good-bye, I will always love you."

She made no reply, but said to Thero-kos, tonelessly: "I yield me, lord."

## V

THE HIGH PRIEST'S FACE LIT, and Alfric realized dully that Thero-kos, too, loved the queen—in his own cold way. "You do well, beautiful one," he said shakily. He came over and kissed her and fondled her stiff body. "You have never done better, black witch. Now come—to your wedding."

He signed to the two slaves, who sconded their torches and took a key from their master. They unlocked Hildaborg's chains,

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and she almost fell into Therokos' arms.

He caressed her, murmuring softly. "There, dear, easy—you will wash and eat and rest, you will wear the robes of honor—be at ease, you are safe now, you are mine forever."

"Aye—" She braced herself, every muscle tautened under the silken skin, and suddenly she hurled the priest from her—sent him staggering against Alfric. "Kill!" she screamed.

The barbarian snarled, wild with a sudden murderous glory, and his manacled hands shot out. One gripped Therokos over the mouth, and the other sank steely fingers into the wattled throat.

The two slaves sprang at him like wild gams. Knives flashed in the bloody light. Hildaborg snatched a torch and swept its flaming end across the eyes of one. He screamed wordlessly, rolling over and over, clawing at his face. Hildaborg snatched up his dagger and lunged at the other.

Alfric groaned. What chance did she have against the deadly experience of a Temple assassin?—Therokos had gone limp. Alfric flung the heavy body crashing into the slave. They went down together. Hildaborg leaped in, her knife rising and falling and rising again, streaming red.

Then she was in his arms, shaken by wild sobbing. He held her close, kissed her, stroked her hair, and had time for a dim wondering amazement that such a woman should have lain in his—his—fate.

There was no time to lose. "Unlock me," he said. "Unlock me and let's get out of this den of Luigur."

She searched Therokos' robes for the key, found it, and cast the chains rattling aside. Alfric snatched up a knife, with an uneasy glance at the door. But the noise had drawn no guards. They must be used to screams in this part of the Temple.

Therokos stirred, groaning. Alfric's big brown form stooped over him, dagger against throat. "Up with you, fat jerrad," hissed the northerner. "Up, and not a word, or you'll be spilling guts over the floor."

The High Priest climbed unsteadily to his feet. "Now lead us out by a secret way," rasped Alfric.

"There is none—" groaned Therokos.

Alfric slapped him with savage fury. "Shut up! I know there is. You priests are like all burrowing snakes, you've more than one exit to your holes. March! And if we meet guards, you'll die first."

Therokos flung him a glance of utter hate, but stumbled obediently ahead. The empty corridor echoed dully to their footfalls. Near its end, Therokos pressed a camouflaged stud, and a section of the rock wall swung aside on noiseless hinges.

Hildaborg took a torch from the wall and closed the door behind them. They went down a long sloping tunnel, so low that Alfric had to stoop. "You cannot hope to escape," said Therokos, his voice again under his wondrous control. "Best you give up peaceably, saving trouble and lives on both sides. In exchange, I will offer better terms than before."

"What?" asked Alfric skeptically.

"Weapons, money, and hengists—then you can leave the city for the hell that awaits you."

"And my men?" insisted Hildaborg.

"Exile, with you."

ALFRIC PONDERED the proposal. If they could get free, with men at their back, they could always raise an army for a new attempt. But surely Therokos was aware of that. So if he had some trick—and it would be strange if he did not—"How do we know you'll keep the bargain?" he asked coldly.

"You have the honor of the High Priest," answered Therokos loftily. Alfric sneered, and Therokos added: "Also, I assume you keep me prisoner until you are safe."

"It does not sound ill—" mused Hildaborg.

Nor did it to Alfric. But he shook his head, stubbornly. "I mistrust him. Moreover, a new war, after he had time to get ready, would take time and lives, and might fail. If tonight is indeed the night of destiny, we can still strike."

"With what?" jered Therokos.

Alfric was not quite sure himself, but prodded the captive ungently onward. They came to another hinged rock, and Therokos opened that door for them. Alfric's spine crawled with the thought of

what might lie beyond; he kept the dagger against Therokos' back as they stepped out.

They were in the shadows of a ruined portico, in a deserted section near the bottom of the hill. White and serene, the ancient columns lifted toward the two moons. The gracious remnants of elder days stretched on either side, half buried by drifting sand. Black against the sky, the Temple loomed on the hillcrest, but Alfric saw no movement.

Hildaborg slipped against him. "Now what shall we do?" she whispered.

He laughed softly, the old grim battle joy flowing up in him. Weariness and despair fell off like an outworn cloak—there was new strength in his thighs and a goal in his mind.

"I heard, down there, how Valkarion really hates the priests," he said. "The city is seething with revolt which wants only a leader. Could the common folk rise, I think nigh all the city guards, impressed into priest service by fear, would come over to their side. And you—they love you, Hildaborg. Could you go to sure friends?"

"Aye—there is old Bronnes the merchant and Captain Hassalon of the guard, and—many."

"Then go, Slip down to them, give them word and tell them to pass it on, to shout it over the city. You, the Empress, the divinely appointed lady of Valkarion, tell the folk to rise against the Temple. Let them storm the citadel, and they may have the looting of it!" He chuckled. "That should bring in the laggards."

"But—untrained mobs, against the guards—"

"There will be other guardsmen on your side. And—this is my part—your Household will also be there."

"But—they're besieged—"

"I'll get them out." Alfric stripped off Therokos' gold-braided cloak, and slung it over her shoulders. "This will cover you well enough so you can get to your friends unharmed. Now go, Hildaborg, and Ruho go with you."

He kissed her, with a wild hunger that dissolved into tenderness. "Stay out of danger," he whispered. "Stay in a safe place till I come for you—Hildaborg—"



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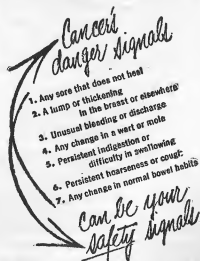
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Therokos scuttled aside. "Oh, no!" snarled Alfric, and stabbed. The priest tumbled, with blood rivering from his stomach, choking his screams. Alfric took Hildaborg again in his arms. "Goodbye, my dearest dear—"

She slipped into the shadows. Alfric sighed, wondering with a brief heaviness if he would ever see her again. He knew full well how desperate his gamble was.

Well, there was work to be done. He turned and ran crouched along the hillside, weaving in and out of darkness. The Moons were almost at their mating now, flooding the city with chill silver radiance.

He grinned up at them. And what did they think of this ruination of their ancient godhead? He could hardly imagine them caring about it. Surely Dannos, the swift warrior, and bright Mother Amaris had more use for an honest fighting man and his warm-hearted love than for a bunch of sniveling shavepates. All honor to the Moons, but not to tyrants and murderers in their name.

He was in the gully now, between Temple and palace. Snakelike, he crawled under the shadow of the bridge to its farther end, where he peered cautiously around an abutment.

The trampled gardens were full of city and Temple guards, whose watchfires ringed the palace. He saw the light agleam on spears and swords and armor, and had time to wonder if he would ever make it past them.

But he had to try. He drew a deep breath, tightened his muscles, and ran.

**L**IKE A FLYING ARROW he ran, noiseless on bare feet, and none saw him before he was hugged against a low thorn-tree near one of the fires. Up it he went, wincing as the thorns raked him, and slipped along a branch almost overhanging the blaze.

He caught a snatch of muttered conversation. "—when they finish those siege engines, down the palace goes. But the Household will be out like a swam of stinger asts. I don't relish fighting the best swords in Valkarion."

"No, but we outnumber them."

"My cousin is in there. I hate to think of—"

Alfric sprang! He soared from his perch and crashed into the chest of the man he had picked. The guard went down in a clang of armor and dry snap of breaking ribs. Alfric snatched his spear and jabbed it through the groin of another. Through that gap, then, he raced, low and zigzag among the bushes.

The siege line roared. The air was suddenly thick with spears and arrows. Alfric felt one rake his leg, and cursed between gasps. To the palace!

"Open!" he howled. "Open, let me by, in the name of the Empress!"

If the garrison took this for a ruse and shot him, it was all over. He plunged up the long staircase, past the crouching craven sphinxes of the Empire. The doors had been broken down in the first assault, but the Imperials had put up a barricade. He saw steel flash as he neared it.

"Hildaborg!" he bawled. "Live the Empress!"

They held their fire. He fell under the barricade while their arrows hummed overhead. The disorderly Temple pursuit broke into retreat, back out of bowshot.

Alfric climbed over the barricade into the great palace ante-chamber. Its golden glory was gutted by fighting, splashed with dry blood, the tapestries in rags and the furniture splintered. Dead men and wounded lay side by side against the walls, under the ancient murals of the Empire's greatness. A dozen tall cuirassiers in gold and purple uniforms—now torn and blood-stained—stood waiting for him. Their spears and swords, axes and bows were at the ready, their haggard faces bleak with suspicion.

"Who are you?" demanded the captain. "What is this?"

"I am Alfric of Aslak—" panted the newcomer.

"*A barbarian—the barbarian—the outlander of the prophecy—*" They hefted their weapons, eyes narrowing, mouths drawing into taut lines.

"I am with Hildaborg, against the Temple," said Alfric. "Twas with my help she escaped their net. Now she leads all of us to overthrow her foes."

"How do we know you speak truth?" snapped the captain.

"You'll know it when I lead you out against the Temple!"

"Out—to be cut down by thrice our number? Go to!"

"They'll have more to worry about than us," said Alfric. In hard brief words, he told them the plan.

At the end of it, the tall captain clapped his shoulder and said in a voice suddenly warm: "That is a tale whose truth we can see for ourselves, when the Em-press' folk come up against the Temple. So I'll believe it, for one. I am Ganimos of the Imperial Household. Welcome, Alfric of Aslak!"

The barbarian nodded, too weary for speechmaking. "Give me some water and wine and a little to eat," he said. "I'll wash, refresh myself, and be ready to go with you at the time of the uprising. If we hit the Temple from the side then, it will fall."

But he had scarcely gotten clean, donned a guardsman's armor, and stretched himself on a couch for a moment's nap, when he heard the blare of trumpets. Ganimos burst into the room where he lay, shouting: "The Temple's men are storming us again in full force, and no help from the city in sight. Up—up and die!"

## VI

**A**LFRIC SWUNG TO HIS FEET, suddenly raging. "Therokos!" he growled. "I thought the devil was left dying, but someone must have found him. He knows the plan, means to thwart it by taking us before Hildaborg's force can be raised. Without us to attack from the flank, the Temple may well drive off her assault."

Ganimos fingered his shortsword with an ominous side glance. "Unless this be some treachery of yours, barbarian—" he murmured.

"What difference has my coming made in your actions so far?" snapped Alfric. "Were I of the enemy camp, would I have come here to fight on your side when they attacked?"

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"Aye—truth, truth. But come!" Ganimos smiled twistedly. "If this is your night of destiny as they say, Alfric, the Fates have their work cut out for them!"

A roar of battle rose as they came out into the antechamber. Ganimos groaned. "There are too many ways into this damned building—we have to guard them all and we lost a quarter of our men the first time. If the Temple men assault one point in strength, they'll be inside!"

"Let them!" blazed Alfric. His eyes were like green fire under the swaying crystal candelabra. "Send messengers to all entrances, Ganimos—tell the men there to retreat, firing the palace to hinder pursuit. We'll gather all our forces here—"

"Burn the palace?" cried the guardsman. "I swore to defend it!"

"You swore to defend the Imperial family too, didn't you? If we can't get outside to help the Empress, you'll be a hell of a use to her! Now go!"

There was no gainsaying the wild power which blazed in the northerner. Ganimos went, shouting. Alfric swung joyously to the barricade, lifting the battle ax he had taken in preference to a shortsword.

The archers and spearmen were sending forth a deadly hail; but they could not halt the enemy charge. Alfric saw that there was cavalry coming against the main entrance, with foot soldiers behind. If they got over or through the flimsy barrier—

"Spears!" he roared. "Spearmen, hold firm!"

He led the way to the barricade top and ranked his guardsmen—they were his now, he was again master of war and equal of kings—in a tight line, with spears braced outward. "Now hold!" he shouted. "Hold, for the sake of Ruho!"

The hengists thundered up the stairs, across the portico, against and up the sides of the barricade in a living wave. For a moment battle raged. The heap of wood and stone chunks broke some of the speed of the charge, but still it shocked against the spear line with a fury that trembled in the walls. Metal clanged, men shouted, hengists screamed in a boiling tide of struggle. Alfric saw a spearman fall, spitted on a lance. He snatched the shaft and thrust it into the throat of the

hengist breaking through—with all his straining force he rammed it home, and steed and rider tumbled back.

The cavalry broke, hengists bucking, refusing to hit that gleaming line again. The Temple infantry line scattered as the maddened animals trampled into it. Householders were streaming into the antechamber, and Alfric's nostrils quivered to the first acrid whiffs of smoke. With a burning palace behind them, the Imperials need have less fear of an attack from the rear.

"The infantry will be up against us in a moment," panted Ganimos.

"Aye, we'd better charge out while they're still disorganized," said Alfric. "We'll assault the Temple itself. And pray your Moons help comes ere we're cut down!"

"We'll die like men, anyway," said Ganimos, "not like beasts in a trap. Thank you for that. Stranger."

"Then—*hai, Hildaborg!*" Alfric plunged over the barricade.

The Household guards followed, a wave that formed into a wedge and plunged across the gardens. The finest warriors of Valkarion hit the wavering Temple forces like a spear going home.

**A**X AND SWORD! Spear and arrow! Clang and roar of metal, whirring weapons, rushing blood—shouts and curses, screams, deep-throated oaths—death unchained in the gardens of Valkarion!

Alfric led the way at the point of the wedge, smiting, smiting. No man could stand before his raging fury—his ax was a dazzle and thunder before him. Hewing, hewing, he led the Household forth..

"*Hildaborg! Hai, Hildaborg!*" The war cry shouted over the hills, rang in echoes with the clamor of metal and shock of combat. "*Hildaborg!*"

These Householders fought like demons, thought Alfric dimly as he struck at the faces and bodies which loomed briefly out of night and shadow into the red dance of fire. How they fought! But—Ruho, if he only had a levy of Aslakan axmen behind him now!

They won through to the bridge—through and over, in a dash that drove the few guards before it like dry leaves be-

fore a gale. Alfric turned gasping to Ganimos. "Hold the bridge," he said. "As soon as we're all over, hold the bridge. That'll protect our rear from cavalry—hengists can't go through that steep gully. And when the foot soldiers have gathered enough wits to come after us that way, you can throw spears down on top of them."

"Aye, your majesty." The title came without thought to the soldier's lips, as he saluted and turned to hail a squad to stay with him.

Alfric led the assault of the rest on the Temple. There were fewer guards on this side of the gully. He hewed at one and felt the shock of the splitting skull through his arms and shoulders, rattling his teeth. Howling, he yanked the weapon free and brought it up to knock aside a sword-thrust and beat the foeman to earth.

Back the Household drove the guards, back to the scowling walls of the Temple. Weird battle, in darkness and cold, with the moons and the great rising flames for fitful illumination. Strange, to trade blows with men who were only red highlights against the roaring night. For a timeless interval, it was all clamor and death and flying steel.

But the Household was being carved away—man after man fell—and now the palace besiegers were streaming through the gully, Ganimos and his squad cut off on the bridge—hai, Hildaborg, it had been a lovely fight but it was nearing its end.

Alfric looked up at the mighty sky, and he saw the majestic shield of Dannos slip over Amaris. Her light was cut off, the hill-top grew dimmer—the Moons were mated.

"O Hildaborg, if only—"

He looked along the wall, against which he now had his back, and saw the torches which swept up the hill, saw the dark mass of humanity and heard its beast cry for blood. And his heart leaped into his throat, and he laughed aloud under Dannos, for here was life again.

"Hai, Hildaborg!" he roared.

The remaining troopers heard him and lifted their weary heads to see. They answered his cry, then, and hewed a way to where he stood. And now the dismayed Temple forces were breaking—the House-



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hold swept along the walls toward the Temple gates.

Battle raged there, as the rebel guards and the blood-howling mob bore down on the garrison. Fire was already licking at the rafters where flame arrows had struck; the Temple would soon stand aflame even as the palace was burning, as the Empire was burning and sundering. The two pillars of Valkarion were crashing to earth, and what would be left when they were gone?

By the leaping fire-blaze, Alfric saw the torn and trampled bodies of priests and slaves. He recognized one battered face and stooped over for a closer look. Therokos lay dead. His wound somehow bandaged and braced, his body cased in armor, he lay where he had fallen.

Well, the High Priest had been a brave man in his way—Alfric gave him warrior's salute and passed on to join the fight.

An armored figure astride a great war-hengist was leading the charge. Even without hearing that lovely voice crying its challenge, Alfric would have known her. He sprang forward, crying out, and seized the bridle, pulling her aside just as the gate defense broke and the attackers burst into the Temple.

"I told you to stay in a safe place!" he raged. Huge and bloodsmear, his lean face painted red by the rising fires, his eyes like green ice in the moonlight, he stood looking up at her.

Hildaborg laughed. "You're still a poor fool, Alfric," she said. "Could I stay at home while you were fighting for me?"

She took off her helmet. Her dark hair streamed down over his face as she leaned forward to kiss him.

In the sky, Dannos swept past Amaris and swung eastward toward the horizon.

**D**AWN CAME, chill and gray, full of weariness and the sobbing of women. Alfric stood leaning on a spear, atop the flat roof of Bronnes the merchant,

and looked out over the city. A leather cloak hung from his broad shoulders against the thin bitter dawn-wind. His face was drawn into bleak lines.

To him came Hildaborg, lovely in the cold colorless light, her unbound locks floating in the breeze. He looked at her in a vague wonder as to how many women she really was. The passionate lover of the tavern, the haughty queen who had faced the captive guard and the captor priest, the wild war-goddess of the battle—and now this girl, slim and fair and mysterious, with wind-cooled cheeks and a secret laughter behind her eyes—which was the real one? Or were they all Hildaborg? And would he ever know?

She touched his arm. "We've won," she whispered.

"Aye—won," said Alfric tiredly. "Won what? The Temple is down, but so is the palace, and there's still riot and looting in the city."

"It will pass. Victory was dearly bought, but now it is ours. And you, Alfric, are ruler of Valkarion."

"I—a heathen outlander?"

"After last night, the Household and the guards will follow you to hell and back. And the rest—"she smiled shyly—"will follow me, who follow you myself."

"A big task. Too big, perhaps, for the son of an Aslakan peasant." Alfric smiled crookedly down at Hildaborg. "Tis more for you, who are born a queen. Best I continue my travels."

"The queen," she said firmly, "needs a king. You have come to the end of your wandering, Alfric." She laughed, a clear beautiful sound in the quiet morning. "You have no choice, my dear. The Sibyl grudgingly admits that the Fortieth Dynasty, 'sons of the heathen,' will be among the greatest. But how can you have sons without—"

Alfric grinned. "I surrender," he said. "Who am I to challenge the Fates?"

Down in the street a hengist, escaped from his owner in the rioting, whinnied his greeting to the early sun.

and-that. As Bernard Shaw once said, "Stuff a cold and starve a fever and hooray for free speech." (From *Man and Superman*, Act III, Scene II.)

Enuf of that, nein? A terrible compulsion is raging through my tortured body, an eerie pull from out of the forgotten past. Dare I—rate the stories? Goodness, I *couldn't*—haven't played in years . . .

Well. Thought this was quite a nice issue, with Poul Anderson's DUEL ON SYRTIS outstanding. Enjoyed seeing THE DIVERSIFAL again, much as I loathe reprints. A surprisingly honest and outspoken yarn. And then the Brackett had some deft touches, per usual. I won't try to go beyond that, but I do not intend to imply any lack of merit in the other stories, no *shh*.

We'll just forget about the cover—or try to. Incidentally, I've been intrigued by this imposter "Asimov" who keeps writing in. As all old-time La Vizi readers know, there was once a rather famous letter writer by the name of Isaac Asenion. This "Asimov" is obviously trying to capitalize on the similarity in names, and has even gone so far as to publish stories and books under the "Asimov" byline. This smacks of rank malpractice, Bixby, and I think you should look into it.

Your readers might be interested to know that Mike Wigodsky is only three years old.

Best regards,

CHAD OLIVER

P.S. Attention Missouri Police: Garvin Berry last reported in your vicinity with wife and baby fan. Suggest calling a statewide emergency—this man, known as Black Berry the Space Pirate, is *dangerous* and has been mysteriously silent of late.

—KINNISON

## YES, WE HEAR!

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Let me begin by congratulating you for the best issue in many a moon. The March PLANET was, in comparison with both previous issues of your magazine and with current competition, outstanding. I was at first undecided whether to buy the issue or nay, for lately I have found much better things to read and don't want to spend my time consuming the kind of trash that is currently flooding the science-fiction field. I apologize for mentally placing you in that category. The lineup would have sold even the most hardened fan. Indeed, the contents page was thrilling reading. You have reached a new level—now stay up there; do you hear?

The only story I did not enjoy was ASTERIOD OF FEAR, which I skipped after the first five pages. Leigh Brackett is Leigh Brackett, which is heartily satisfying. Her story was a relief from Coppel's puny efforts to imitate her. Van Vogt was good, also Anderson and Pyfe. Reprints are not a bad idea, but if you start to run out of good material, please have the good sense to give it up. THE DIVERSIFAL was a good start. I have dreams of rereading Gardner Fox's THE LAST MONSTER. Take notice.

Why must you make such a great improve-

ment in interior illustrations when you persist in such trashy covers?

The Vizigraph was dull and fortunately brief, illuminated only by vigorous epistle of Dennis Strong. Mr. Strong has revealed a great deal concerning his own nature while denouncing his idiotic fellows, PS readers. We find at once that Mr. Strong is an infinitely superior creature, high above the standard norm. One might say he is a clear cleared! This has not affected Mr. Strong in any way, however. He himself seems to want to tell us; he is a snob. We find that Mr. Strong has a great knowledge and appreciation of great literature. He is the one man in the world who understands Ray Bradbury. One begins to wonder why he reads PLANET when he could be having the time of his life pursuing something educational, such as "The Decameron." We find, too, a hidden meaning in his denunciation of us poor psychopathological pseudo-intellects. We find here a highly egotistical snob whose own ego is either so steeped in a superiority complex, or so engulfed in an inferiority complex, that he must denounce the attempts of science-fiction fans and readers (a group of which every member is a sub-moron but himself) to be funny, and then must end his letter with a disgustingly unwitty paragraph concerning the spelling of a man's name! Perhaps by itself, Mr. Strong's effort might seem mildly amusing, but climaxing the flood of insult and abuse which he has written it is nauseously out of place and degrading. Oh, were Cicero alive! How he could denounce the likes of you! There you have it, Mr. Strong. You do not like us and you have insulted us. We are not going to waste time defending ourselves, answering your charges. You are not going to like the next few editions of the Vizigraph, sir. You have said your piece; now hear ours. Then stop reading us and leave us alone.

I am very sincerely yours,

DAVID M. CAMPBELL

418 High Street  
Closter, N. J.

## BRIEF BEEF

2645 S. Marshall St.,  
Phila. 48, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

May I enter a brief beef?

I always read the readers' comments in magazines because I consider them as interesting as any story, but your letter pages seem to be nothing but a series of "one just like the next" flip-pant, wise-cracking, screw-ball creations redolent of high school humor. Your readers—(most of them)—seem to be unable to express an opinion of your story offerings in simple English; it's got to be in the form of some weird, word-scrambled prose or poetry as if some kid were pounding wildly at the typewriter keys, alternating between red and black ribbons and caps and small letters so that the result read like some pictograph puzzle. No one objects to humor or wit in writing, but your Vizigraph pages bear the same resemblance to critical letters that jitterbugging does to normal ballroom dancing. Doesn't anyone ever write in to P.S. to say sensibly and briefly that he likes, or doesn't like, a certain story because—and then go on from there in sensible literate language?

And I am not a pedantic old fogey!

I have a fairly large collection of fantasy



books—all in like new condition—with dust jackets, that I am offering for sale at most reasonable prices. If any fans (jitterbug or otherwise!) are interested, drop me a stamped self-addressed envelope for lists.

Sincerely,

A. ZELITCH

## DID YURE MITHER COME FROM MARS?

186-29 Avon Road  
Jamaica 3, N. Y.

DEAR ED

The first thing that really gave me a jolt was the heroine's *nom d'épée*. Leigh Brackett's heroine of course. First of all it's an old Irish name, and more startling, it's the Gaelic version of my own name. The Gaelic "C" being equivalent to our "K," and the "ai" phoneticizing to "c."

This having naturally intrigued me, (Four years of high-school Latin does horrible things to your English) I looked around and sure enough found a few other things: Ban Cruach, whose last name is the name of a grim old idol; Lugh from Lugh Lamfada, the *Ildanach* or the doer-of-all-things, the nearest equivalent of a Gaelic Sun-god; Balin, I think, is Welch in origin, but that's only a guess; one of Conaire Mor's foster-sons was named Rogain, Fer Rogain to be exact. Well that's all I noticed—aren't you glad? I guess a writer has to get names from somewhere.

I'm glad Lord Ciaran was supposed to be a man. Otherwise I'd've been insulted.

I get more darn mail addressed to Miss Keran O'Brien. Even a subscription to a SF magazine—not yours.

This letter is longer than was intended at the start. Letters have a habit of doing such things. Anyway I have a Physics paper to write, so good-bye.

KERAN O'BRIEN

## MANKIND . . . SO FAR . . .

1521 W. Clinch Ave.  
Knoxville, Tennessee

DEAR JERRY:

In reading the Vizigraph in the March (51, naturally) ish, I ran into two letters that made me sit up and take notice. Both, no doubt, were inserted by the powers that be to further the cause of corresponding readers, giving them something to chaw on. In the order they appeared:

On page 15, Michael Wigodsky says, apropos of something (I missed the story he speaks of), "And, since no change in size in the infected subjects was mentioned, how does Mr. Coppel account for the fact the apes which man most resembles (or vice versa) are the small (usually, that is) lemurs?" I won't quarrel too much with him for calling lemurs "apes," since *The American College Dictionary* says apes can be defined

as "any monkey"—although in this same letter Mr. Wigodsky seems to apply the common distinction, since he says, just before the above quotation, "I started to write apes instead of monkeys above, but remembered in time that there are no native American apes—but I object to the statement that 'the apes which man most resembles . . . are the . . . lemurs.'" I hope you aren't getting tired of quotations, for here comes one, on which I base my objection. Well, to tell the truth, it is the only one I can put my finger on right off, though I'm sure scholarly research would produce more: "And the actions of lemur betray only commensurate mentality, *with no hint that they are related to the four most intelligent animals in the world.* (Italics are mine.) The lemurs are, in fact, very ordinary small mammals, simple and rather primitive, who have barely enough peculiarities to be classed as Primates." This quotation comes from *Mankind So Far*, by William Howells, page 48. If Mr. Wigodsky meant that lemurs are the closest living relatives of the unspecialized primate that is considered to be the ancestor of modern primates, I am unable to argue with him, for I don't know; but that is not the impression I received in reading his letter. Well, just thought I'd mention it; I dare say you'll get some really learned letters from Anthropology professors the country over.

The second letter calling me to my trusty typewriter is that by Dennis Strong. I think the man is to be congratulated, not on what he said, but on how he said it. It must have taken a great deal of brain belabouring and research to come up with as fine a string of epithets as I've ever seen pass the censor's office. The very heatedness of his language seems to me to smack of cold-blooded intentionalism—the intent being to get into the Vizigraph, and to stir up a holocaust of letters. If, as he avows, his intent is "to define what I consider to be a malign influence in science-fiction today," why did he not do it in language less likely to arouse emotions, and which would be even more exact? Had he been more temperate in his letter, I would be inclined to agree with him; I think he DOES have a point, but I deplore his expression of it. Moderation, MODERATION, my dear sir, still has some adherents. I said he does have a point—the "mere listing of stories" is a sentiment I can wholeheartedly agree with, but I notice such letters are scarce in this issue. May they get scarcer! I'll leave the vitriolic name calling to those more in practice than I, and I'm sure Mr. Strong (Gods of Greece! What if Dennis Strong is a woman??) will receive more than he bargained for in reply to that letter. Incidentally, that letter rings bells of memory; I have seen similar epistles published in quite a few copies of stf mags over the years. Is it a small, well-established cult, or just scattered individuals?

BLACK AMAZON OF MARS was superb; the kind that makes me drool whenever I see a copy of PS. Couldn't you possibly go into monthly production?

Moderately yours,

J. W. LEAKY

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\*R. C. Peterson, New Jersey



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\*S. B. A., Kansas City, Mo.



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\*D. E. G., Wausau, Wis.



## Lots of Fun

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\*B. R., Jr., Hartford, Connecticut



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\*E. T., Prichard, Ala.

\*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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